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Radicals in Somalia call for holy war against Ethiopia

UIC militiamen on patrol in Mogadishu

Harry der Nederlanden

The latest reports from Somalia suggest that the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), which has finally brought law and order to parts of the country, is beginning to impose an intolerant form of Islamic law. News stories of a few weeks ago (also carried in *CC*) reported that the residents of Mogadishu appreciated the greatly improved security and freedom of movement provided by the new authorities.

But now the Islamist government is imposing strict standards of behavior, religious and otherwise, that have caused some to flee. So the new order is very much a mixed blessing for those who are not Islamic fundamentalists. As a UN report points out, increased security means people can go about their daily life: traders can safely take home their earnings; children can go to school regularly and without fear; clinics and hospitals can concentrate on primary healthcare instead of constantly dealing with the trauma of conflict.

Moreover, humanitarian assistance, which had been unable to reach displaced people in the country for several years, has been entering the newly opened port and been distributed to camps outside the city. Although, after the murder of a foreign cameraman and an Italian nun in Mogadishu, the humanitarian community did withdraw in September.

On the streets of Mogadishu, reported IRIN the UN news service, there is much debate about "moderates" and "extremists". A local journalist said his personal freedoms had changed in many ways since the takeover, "good and bad."

"In some areas," he said, "there is no music or cinemas, radio stations have closed down, we have no freedom to write, and they are doing public executions." He says there is a wait and see atmosphere.

"When it comes to security, we feel freedom. When it comes to personal freedoms, we feel worried."

Public floggings were meted out for men and women accused of selling drugs, chewing khat (a mild drug) and engaging in "immoral behavior". There are public lectures and radio appeals addressing religious commitment, behavior and morality, and the interpretation of the Koran.

There is also consternation over new standards of dress code. In UIC offices, men who dress "western-style" are frowned upon. Increasingly, women in Mogadishu are adopting a full veil, more associated with Saudi Arabia and the Arab states than Somali-style modesty. Black, brown and grey hijabs have been steadily replacing the vibrant colorful Somali scarves.

There is much debate – in private – by Mogadishu residents as to whether people are changing their habits through religious choice, or just to protect themselves. "Women are already taking up the veil not out of choice but as a precaution, so that no one singles them out," said one businessman, a supporter of the UIC but critical of the new dress codes.

Centralizing policy

Some of the social confusion comes from the absence of policy. Soon after the takeover, cases were being reported of women being ordered to wear the hijab. But the UIC leadership explains these incidents as the challenge of centralization. There are 27 branches of the courts in Mogadishu, and 11 outside the city, all used to operating autonomously. Different local courts were imposing different standards and implementing different punishments. Centralization of the courts did not take place until late September. Once the courts had been brought under a central authority, the UIC officially established a judicial system under Sharia law.

The confusion over codes of behavior illustrates the struggle between the moderates and hardliners within the UIC. Since the takeover, there has been increased emphasis on "jihad" and visible militarization of society – including seminars on

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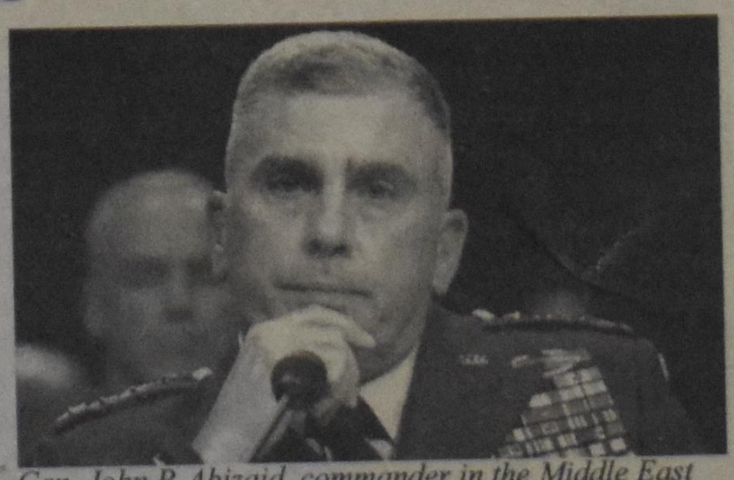
The new US consensus on Iraq: no painless choices

Harry der Nederlanden

Although immediately after their electoral victory the US Democrats were talking about reconciliation and bi-partisan action on Iraq, within a few days some Democrats were talking about pressing for a phased withdrawal of troops in 4-6 months. That probably addresses domestic politics more than it does the Iraq situation. The *LA Times* suggested, however, that a consensus was emerging between members of both parties that sets more realistic deadlines for the Iraqi government and that accelerates the shift of US troops from a combat to an advisory role. Several prominent Democrats, like Hilary Clinton, have urged caution, for fear a hasty pullback will wreak havoc in the region.



Gen. John P. Abizaid, commander in the Middle East

Both parties are desperately seeking an honorable way to disengage their troops from what is looking more and more like a civil war.

At this writing, the central topic of discussion was a Republican proposal, put forward by John McCain, to precede any withdrawal with a temporary troop build-up – one last major push – so as not to leave the Iraqi government and military with an unmanageable situation. The government must have at least a chance at sustaining itself.

Although both parties are anticipating the work of the

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News

Somalia ... continued from p. 1

jihad for men and women, and training camps to unify the militia into a centralized force. Some UIC leaders see security and "defence of the country and the religion" as the priority, and have made it the rallying call.

The hardliners – known as the Shabaab group – invest in militarization, advocate strict religious codes and punishments, and shun contact with the non-Muslim world. Prominent UIC figures, including Abu Utayba, appear in a 'jihadi video' doing the rounds in Mogadishu and the diaspora. The video glorifies Osama bin Laden, shows military training camps in Mogadishu, and calls on "any marginalized Muslim to come to Somalia." It calls Somalia "the new Afghanistan of the world."

Other leaders, however, have repudiated the video and are working to secure international support and assistance in rebuilding Somalia.

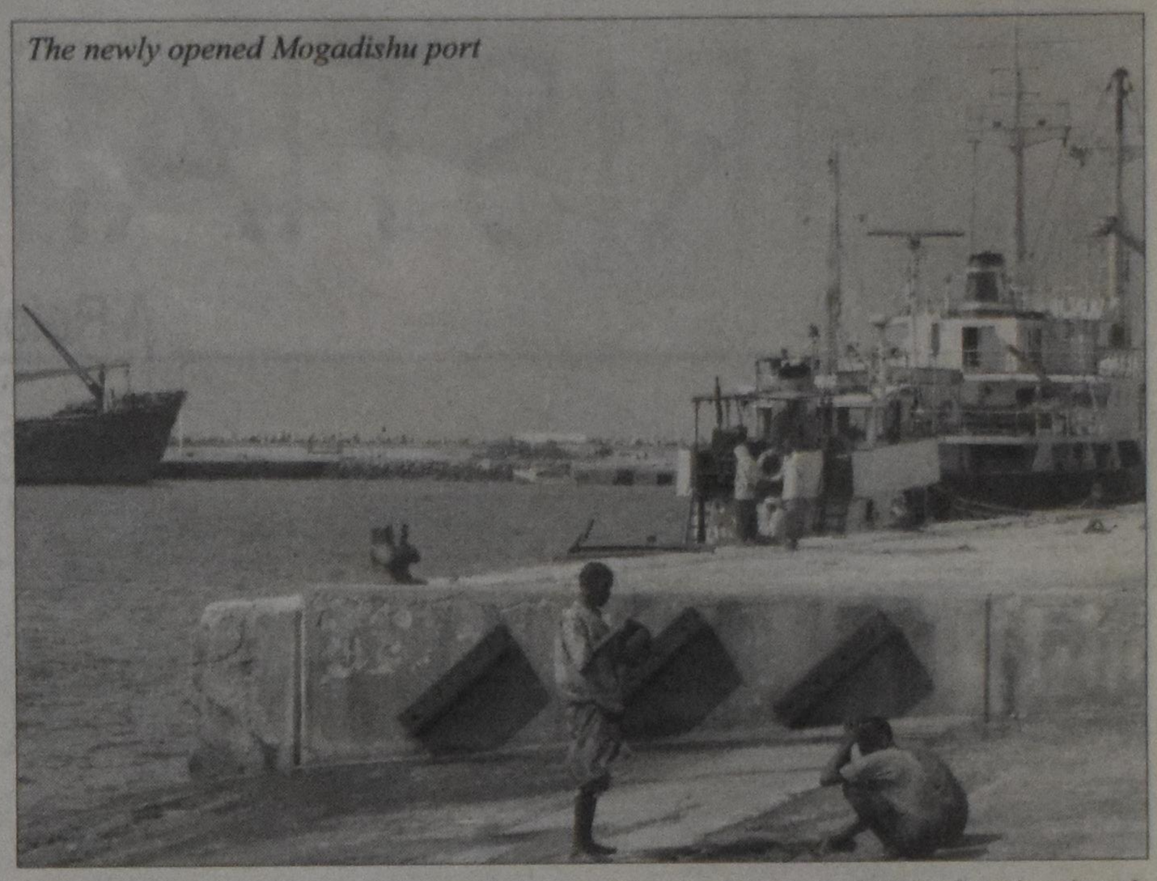
Ibrahim Hassan Adow, head of UIC Foreign Affairs, said the greatest challenge for the UIC is to meet basic needs. "Our biggest challenge is to go beyond peace and provide social services, to provide the basic needs, whether it is food, medical care, shelter, education, employment. While we do this, we have to simultaneously show the world that we want to pacify Somalia and defend the Somali people, and establish a working relationship [with the international community]."

Perhaps the biggest threat to the "Talibanization" of Somalia is the decision by Ethiopia to send troops across the border to side with the UN-backed Transitional Federal Government holed up in the town of Baidoa. It's a government in name only, never having exercised actual authority over the country and unable to restore order. Since Ethiopia is a Christian country, this may turn the conflict into a religious war. Some of the radicals have already sent out a call to other Islamic states for a holy war against Ethiopia. Recently the UN also released a report exposing a connection between Hezbollah in Lebanon and radicals in Somalia.

The Economist warned that any indecisive Western intervention in the country would only worsen the situation by strengthening extremists over relatively moderate leaders in Mogadishu. "A jihadist fringe has been itching for a holy war," observed *The Economist*, "which may mean terrorist attacks, against Ethiopia and other Western allies." Coaxing the moderate Islamists with aid might prove more effective in the long run than encouraging Ethiopa's intervention, which could provoke a regional conflict.

Elizabeth Kendal of the World Evangelical Alliance, citing articles by Dr. Peter Pham, suggests that Al Qaeda is already in Somalia; jihadis from many foreign countries have come to Mogadishu, including Arabs, Afghans, Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Palestinians, and Syrians. She cites reports of weapons being stockpiled by the Somali Islamists, including anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons as well as hand weapons in preparation for a large scale war with Ethiopia.

This report is cobbled together largely from news stories provided by IRIN, the news service of the UN.



The newly opened Mogadishu port

Iraq ... continued from p. 1

bipartisan Iraq Study Group led by former Secretary of State James Baker and due in December, few expect it to broach any genuinely new options. In the words of David Brooks of *The New York Times*, "The Baker-Hamilton commission may produce more peace in America than in Iraq." There simply are no new strategies that haven't been tried or that won't meet with the same difficulties as any other.

There is also much talk about involving Syria and Iran in the attempt to stabilize Iraq. Baker has indicated he's open to that possibility, as has Robert Gates, the man who is replacing Donald Rumsfeld. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has also urged that Syria and Iran be invited to join in the effort to bring peace to the country.

Till now, Syria and Iran have only cooperated in making things worse, the one serving as a conduit for all sorts of foreign jihadis and the other supporting Shiite militias. Recently, however, Syria has expressed its willingness to join in such an effort. Iran is another matter. It is not eager to be seen cooperating with the Americans. By sowing violence in Iraq, it ties up America so that the latter has no inclination to bare its teeth against an Islamist regime in pursuit of nuclear weapons. Or, rather, although the inclination is there, it is too busy chewing on Iraq.

The new realism

The new buzzword in Washington, according to Jeffrey Simpson of the *Globe and Mail*, is *realism*, which means it will be harder in the future to get the US involved abroad even in humanitarian causes – like stopping the genocide in Darfur. "The New American Century" may end up with a much more inward-looking America, one that is unwilling to play policeman to the world even when such a role is called for.

Even as the two US parties talked about achieving a consensus on Iraq, Iraqis demonstrated that they were further away than ever from any sort of consensus – other than a determination to kill one another. Every day, it seems, brings kidnappings, bombings and group executions in a spiralling cycle of revenge killings. Little wonder that some say civil war is no longer just a threat but a daily reality in some areas of Iraq. Baghdad seems caught up in a killing frenzy.

Meanwhile in the US every media pundit, armed with 20-20 hindsight, now knows that the Bush war on terror and invasion of Iraq was a boondoggle and its execution a fiasco. And the constant temptation is to focus on rehearsing how it all became such a mess and who is to blame. In the quest for a new realism and the delicious demolition of the idealism of the neocons, few put the welfare of the Iraqi people first. Alas, the new realism is no less self-centred, perhaps more so, than the old idealism.

A phrase often repeated by both Democrats and Republicans is: "The future of Iraq will be determined by the people of Iraq." And they're not talking about a new round of voting. It may only be a way of telling Iraqis, 'If you're too busy killing one another to take over the governing and reconstruction of your country – goodbye."

On *Newshour*, Senator Carl Levin (D) said, "We cannot save the Iraqis from themselves.... we've given them an opportunity. We can provide them some help, and we have for three-and-a-half years, with great loss of blood and treasure on our part."

Although it may well be that from now on American policy in Iraq will be driven much more by domestic politics than needs in Iraq, it is surprising (to me at least) that the American public has stayed the course as long as it has, for the cost has indeed been high.

Iraqi readiness

As analysts take stock of Iraq's readiness for a gradual US drawdown, however, they find that governance, reconstruction and the training of Iraqi troops and policemen all display an abysmal lack of readiness.

US officials visiting Iraqi officials talk about a curious lack of urgency among those responsible for running the country. Government officials seem not only incapable of addressing the impending disintegration of the country, they don't seem even to be scrambling for solutions. Hence, the impulse among US politicians to build a fire under their feet by setting benchmarks and drawing up timetables.

The Washington Post published a long article showing that reconstruction efforts in Iraq have failed miserably to supply what was promised. Millions have been squandered, sabotaged, stolen by corrupt officials or invested in foolish projects. The so-called Iraq Marshall Plan did not do for Iraq what it did for Europe, largely due to the lack of security, but also because the American way of doing things seldom worked in Iraq.

Even facilities that were completed are in peril because Iraqis have not been trained how to maintain and operate them. In other cases they stand empty because anyone going to work in them has been threatened with death. Many projects go begging, for although Iraqis are desperate for work, they are afraid to accept contracts from the US, as hundreds of those foolhardy enough to do so have been slaughtered or suffered attacks on their families.

One of the most important jobs over the next few months will be recruiting and training more Iraqis to take over the duties of US troops. Yet, according to reporters, that job has been poorly done as well. It has often been assigned to officers without sufficient training themselves or even to national guard officers, as the best US officers were assigned to combat duty. Many had no previous experience in combat or in Iraq, and they frequently had to communicate through interpreters who knew little or no English. Sometimes experienced Iraqi officers were assigned American advisors who were green and had little or no understanding of the situation in Iraq.

Painful choices

Overall it's not a hopeful picture. Those pushing the "new consensus" often talk as if it's only a matter of getting tough with the Iraqis to get them to do the necessary things to bring compromise and stability. But the recent surveys of Iraqi capability raises questions about the ability of the Iraqi government and the Iraqi military to respond to such pressure.

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Politics

EFC supports Harper on China and human rights

In light of recent news reports, The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Religious Liberty Commission issued the following statement regarding China cancelling its meetings with Canada:

Recent news stories suggest that human rights dialogue could be creating a rift in Canadian and Chinese trading relationships. If this is so, should this be reason to disregard human rights dialogue altogether? The answer is no. As a member of the General Assembly of the United Nations, Canada signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 and, in engaging with China on these issues, is demonstrating its commitment to the Declaration by being a voice for the oppressed in the international arena.

The Religious Liberty Commission (RLC), established through the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada (EFC) in 1997, is concerned about human rights issues in China – particularly the lack of religious freedom. The Chinese government's Regulations on Religious Affairs, passed March 1, 2005, severely limit the freedom of Christian and other religious groups in China. Persecution faced by Chinese citizens, including human rights lawyers, includes destruction and loss of personal property, imprisonment, torture and death.

The RLC is deeply concerned about the Regulations on Religious Affairs and the impact on the freedom of all Chinese to exercise their right to practice their religion or belief. China has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. As such, China has not agreed to respect and protect its citizens' rights to "freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching" (Article 18.1.). Respecting religious freedom is a norm of international human rights protection and a cornerstone of Canada's international policy.

The RLC, therefore, encourages Canadian government leaders, and all world leaders, to call China to account on its human rights records.

Several days later the EFC issued another statement applauding Harper for his stance: "He reaffirmed the dignity of human life when he expressed that fundamental Canadian values, such as belief in human rights and freedom of religion, take precedence 'over the almighty dollar.' His actions set an example for other world leaders to do the same."

Janet Epp Buckingham, who is a member of the RLC, said, "Discrimination in both countries creates an inability for Christians to pursue their faith publicly through church services and worship. Persecution takes place in the form of loss and destruction of property, imprisonment, torture and even death of men, women and children as a result of their belief in Jesus Christ."

She further urged "the Canadian government and human rights groups to build on the Prime Minister's actions and to continue to promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right."

A father's gratitude

Principalities & Powers

David T. Koyzis

Although Advent has just begun, these days my thoughts take me back two months to the celebration of Thanksgiving, a holiday that must puzzle the minds of unbelievers. True, they may have no trouble coming up with things to be thankful for, but then they have to figure out to whom they owe their gratitude. Christian believers have no difficulty with this; we freely confess that all we are and have comes from God.

The Heidelberg Catechism, easily the jewel of the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions, is divided into four sections titled respectively Human Misery, Deliverance, the Sacraments and Gratitude. There can be no doubt, of course, that this is the proper order. In so far as we belong – in body and soul, in life and in death – to Jesus Christ and have been saved through his death and resurrection, we live our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit in obedient gratitude for his grace to us. Under Gratitude, the Catechism focuses on the Decalogue and the Lord's Prayer, thereby indicating that the believer's life consists in obeying God's commands as well as nurturing a relationship with him through prayer.

This past summer, when I was suffering through the worst of depression, I found one symptom of this malady especially troublesome. I found it difficult to *feel* gratitude to God for his blessings to me, because everything appeared in such a negative light. I had to struggle to thank God on a cognitive level while feeling exactly opposite. In this respect, depression precipitated an inner spiritual struggle taking weeks to resolve.

Nevertheless, in the midst of adversity God finds ways to communicate to us – sometimes in startling and unexpected ways. I myself experienced one of these episodes in July, when I was still feeling poorly.

It was in the evening, as we were sitting at our dining room table. Our family had observed evening prayer, as is our custom, about fifteen minutes earlier. I was about to read a book to Theresa, who was then seven years old and was seated beside me. Suddenly she looked up at me and said, "Daddy, God will give you healing in the name of Jesus Christ."

I gasped at this, scarcely believing my ears. I asked her to repeat it, and at first she was embarrassed to do so. But I insisted and she repeated this promise. By then I was in tears, and I gave her a hug, telling her this was the best thing she could have said to me. Remarkably, a week later I was beginning to feel much better and improvement was steady after that.

So what am I thankful for? I am thankful for our daughter, who came into the world more than three months early and was in hospital for more than ten weeks thereafter. I am grateful for the people who prayed for her and the medical staff who cared for her during those trying first months. I am thankful that Theresa bears so few side effects of her rocky beginnings. I thank her teachers at Calvin Christian School here in Hamilton for playing such an important role in nurturing her faith. Finally, I thank God that he chose such an unlikely vessel to communicate to her father so powerful a message of comfort and assurance.

During Advent and Christmas, as we celebrate the coming of Christ into the world, be aware that we observe another Thanksgiving, as we offer gratitude for his sacrifice for our sins. "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (II Corinthians 9:15)

David T. Koyzis is in his 20th year of teaching political science at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, Ontario, and returns to this space after a three-month absence.

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The argument often encountered in the American media is: "Can it get any worse than it already is? Aren't we only aggravating the situation by staying?" Additional ammo comes from the report that the Iraq invasion has only multiplied the number of jihadis and terrorists.

On the other side are the analysts who warn that a hasty American withdrawal can indeed make things worse in Iraq, much worse.

Monica Duffy Toft, associate professor of public policy at Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government, writes: "If [the US] leaves, the Shiites will brutally settle accounts with the Sunnis before, perhaps, opening hostilities against the Kurds (with tacit support from Iran and Turkey).

"If it supports the Kurds and Shiites – the two peoples most abused under Hussein, most betrayed by the United States since 1990 and, as a result, the two most worthy of our support on moral grounds – it risks alienating important regional allies: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan [non-Shiite countries].

"On the other hand, doing the right thing (supporting the Shiites) also means doing the most practical thing, which is ensuring a stable peace and establishing long-term prospects for democracy and economic development.

"If the United States supports the Sunnis [vastly outnumbered in Iraq, but the majority in the region], it will be in a position very close to its Vietnam experience: struggling to underwrite the survival of a militarily untenable, corrupt and formerly brutal minority regime with no hope of gaining broader legitimacy in the territory of the former Iraq."

None of the choices before the US give the prospect of an easy way out or an end to the escalation of mutual terror. They will be no easier for the Democrats than for the Republicans. More Iraqis will die no matter which choices the US makes. The scarcest commodity in Iraq today is hope.

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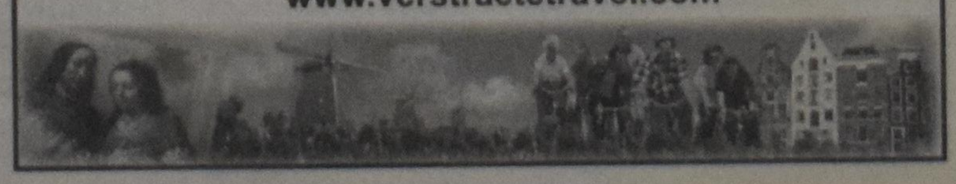

Guest editorial

"Opening the doors wider"

Rev. Andrew Beunk

Dear Christian school administrators, admission committee members, teachers, parents, it is time! As a Christian school community, it is time to embrace a broader, more Biblical vision for Christian education that flows out of our deep commitments to a Reformed theology of Kingdom and covenant. No longer must our mandate be for "covenant kids" alone, we must open the doors wider.

Jesus urges us to let our light shine. Our children ask themselves in song, "Hide it under a bushel?" to which we must reply – with Spirit inspired passion for witness – "NO!" It is time to invite and welcome ALL of those who are created in God's image to be educated under the banner, "our world belongs to God." And yes, in case there is any question in your mind, by this I mean children of believers *and* unbelievers alike.

In the contemporary testimony "Our World Belongs to God" article 50 we read, "In education we seek to acknowledge the Lord by promoting schools and teaching in which the light of his Word shines in all learning, where students, of whatever ability, are treated as *persons who bear God's image* and have a place in his plan." (emphasis mine). Do children of unchurched families not bear God's image? Of course they do. Do they not have a place in God's plan? Of course they do. Should we not invite them to discover the image and hear about the plan *in our schools* as well as our churches? Of course we should. It's time to open the doors wider.

Discipleship and evangelism

But you ask, "Is that not turning our schools into evangelistic institutions?" I suppose, in some sense it is. Our schools like our churches, are outposts of vibrant kingdom activity. The promises of Christ are received (covenant), and the reign of Christ is lived into (kingdom), in our churches *and* our schools. Why then, for many of our schools, is the missions / evangelistic nature of Christ's kingdom absent? Well you say, churches carry out the evangelistic calling of the kingdom, schools carry out the discipleship calling. But can discipleship and evangelism be separated? I think not. When Christ commissions his disciples, he declares them to be "witnesses." And witnesses by definition are evangels – heralds of the Kingdom.

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But didn't Abraham Kuyper make some very important distinctions concerning the nature and task of schools, churches, and governments – the term "sphere sovereignty" comes to mind? Yes he did. However, in my humble opinion, if those philosophical distinctions exclude children of unbelievers from hearing the Lordship of Christ applied to all of life in a school setting, if they exclude some children from being educated in a setting where they can discover that they too bear God's image, if they exclude some children from hearing an elementary school teacher inviting them to participate in God's unique plan for their life – and it's not clear to me that Kuyper would have excluded them – then too bad for Kuyper.

As recently as 2003 the Christian Reformed Church Synod approved a study committee report that invites our schools to open the doors wider. In that report we read "…there can be no conflict between our commitment as Reformed Christians to both missions and/or evangelism and Christian education; at least not if we are rooted in divine covenantal promises and accept Christ's royal authority." (*Agenda for Synod 2003*, p. 339). Sadly, however, a number of our administrators and admission committees, in practice, still admit "covenant kids" only.

Share the treasure

So where do we go from here? First, embrace the broader vision for Christian education for *all* children. Let's share the treasure. Second, address the very obvious issue that will arise, namely, as a parentally run school, how do we deal with the voices of parents who send their children but have no Christian faith commitment? Do they get a vote like everyone else?

Clearly constitutions will need some revising and the issue of membership will need to be addressed. Will this create two classes of parents: those who are members and affirm the faith-based vision, and those who do not? I think it will. But that's ok; let's be up front with that. Sure there will be some details to work out, but thoughtful consideration will take care of these details.

Some important conversations will need to take place among our own board and committee members but also with other Christian schools. It is my understanding that there are schools in the Christian Schools International (CSI) umbrella that already operate within this framework, let's learn from them. Lastly, instruct our admissions committees to "open the doors wider."

Incarnational witness

Let me conclude with some reflections on why I feel we must embrace this vision. First, and it needs repeating, as an outpost of the Kingdom, our schools must accept Christ's call to be his witnesses in the classroom to believers and unbelievers alike.

Second, what a gift for our children to grow up in a setting where they may interact and build relationships with children who are God's image bearers but perhaps not (yet!) his daughters and sons. Wise and sensitive parents and teachers will help our covenant children be a loving witness to non-churched kids, even at a young age.

Third, parents will be given more opportunities to develop relationships with unbelieving parents through a variety of social interactions (plays, sports activities, assemblies, etc). As a brief aside, I think it's fair to say that for many in the Reformed community, between the time spent serving in our church community and our school community, we are often left feeling we have no time to develop relationships with our broader societal community. We know how essential it is to develop relationships with non-Christians in order to share the love of Christ with them, but between volunteering at the church and the school, many are left feeling 'I have no time!' Now our schools will be a natural setting in which to develop these kinds of relationships.

Fourth, drawing from a much broader population will likely have a significant impact on enrolment. As enrolment numbers increase, and optimal student-teacher ratios can be achieved, the cost of education can be reduced as it is carried by a larger community of people.

Fifth, as Christians with a kingdom vision for all of life, education could now be an important part of our holistic presentation of the Gospel. An inner city pastor in Chicago who I met a while back at a "cross-fertilization" gathering between the various agency and denominational boards of the CRC, who himself served on the Home Missions board at the time, felt our schools offered the children of poorer families a life-transforming opportunity for learning under the Lordship of Christ, *and* meeting him as their Savior. Congregations are already providing the poorer families in our communities with an "incarnational" witness that addresses basic needs and life skills. But what a powerful witness we could provide if these same poorer families could be welcomed into our schools. Imagine if a local church earmarked funds from its faith-promise missions budget to provide tuition assistance to an unchurched needy family in its community that it had contact with, knowing that, not only will the children of these families receive an excellent education, but they, along with their parents, will also be connected to a Christian school community that bears witness to the Gospel of Christ. Imagine these same churches also making positive contact with these families and thereby prayerfully looking for Spirit-led opportunities to bring the same Gospel witness. Without being formally tied together, congregations and school communities could together participate in a holistic witness that builds on rich heritage of Christ-centered education.

Finally, I'll use a story my colleague and friend, a pastor in a local Christian and Missionary Alliance church, and a former school teacher in an Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) school, shared with me a couple of years ago. Once, during a school assembly he sat next to a parent who also happened to be Muslim. This man and his wife sent their children to this Christian school because they appreciated the emphasis on strong academics and traditional values. That their children would learn Bible stories and Christian songs, that they would be taught about Christ and learn how to pray, was far less important to them than good academics and values, nevertheless, they accepted these "less important" things as part of the package. At the close of the assembly the principal of the school offered a prayer. My then teacher friend noticed a tear in this man's eye after the prayer had concluded and he smiled at him. The Muslim parent leaned over and whispered, "That was the most beautiful prayer I have ever heard."

That is our witness folks! And if our schools can be places that winsomely and unashamedly proclaim this witness to all children, to God be the Glory!

Rev. Andrew Beunk, pastor of Fruitland CRC, lives in Stoney Creek, Ontario.

Re: Harry Antonides "Against Judicial Activism" *(CC, Nov. 6)*

Since you hear from me when I disagree with you, maybe you should also hear from me when I agree with you. I essentially share your view that the Charter of Rights has created opportunities for judicial activism, and that this has turned judges into unelected policy-makers.

However, would Rory Leishman really have written a book to denounce judicial activism if the ideology of Canada's judges were more to his liking? One may doubt it. Judicial activism is not a recent phenomenon. It exists wherever constitutions contain policy prescriptions.

Although some of the constitutional rulings of judges may be what the Germans call *Hineininterpretation* and the Dutch call *inlegkunde*, the real cause of judicial activism is not so much the mentality of judges but the Charter of Rights itself. Both the Charter and the policies imposed by the judiciary are essentially liberal. Canada is now constitutionally designed as a liberal democracy, and liberalism sets the parameters of democratic decision-making. Here I'm using the word liberalism as it is used outside of North America, that is, as the ideology that gives primacy to personal liberty and individual rights.

If Parliament decided to abolish the minimum wage and to privatize Canada Pension, no judge would rule that these decisions are unconstitutional. On the other hand, if Parliament were to forbid a religion or impose press censorship, the Supreme court would nullify these policies. The difference lies in the fact that Canada is constitutionally a liberal democracy and not a social democracy.

As long as Canada's constitution remains what is today and as long as politicians refuse to apply the notwithstanding clause as a matter of course, we can expect judicial activism to continue in one form or another.

So much of policy-making is determined by ideological fashion. Even if Canada didn't have a Charter of Rights, fashionable policies like gay marriage would still be implemented, although perhaps not as fast. Judges are part of the elite and they share elite opinion. As elected representatives, politicians also have to take popular opinion into account, but as a rule, it is elite opinion that eventually prevails, with or without a constitution.

Koos Schipper

Jewish Congress reopens school funding debate in Ontario

The Canadian Jewish Congress in Ontario has opened the debate about government funding for faith-based school anew. It shifted its approach away from the idea of the tax credit, as that was implemented by the Conservative government in 2001 (only to be scrapped by the Liberals two years later). Instead, as an article in *The Toronto Star* points out, it embraces the ideas of the 20-year-old Shapiro Report.

The Jewish congress spelled a set of principles that should govern funding for religious schools, that is very like the Edmonton model:

"Ontario faith-based schools should be treated in an equitable and fair manner, regardless of religious affiliation.

"Just as schools in the public sphere follow criteria established by the Ministry of Education, faith-based schools would also meet appropriate approved provincial criteria.

"Faith-based schools would meet appropriate approved provincial accountability requirements."

Ontario granted full funding for Catholic schools in 1984 as part of the provincial system. The Jewish Congress now plans to press for a similar status for its schools.

The Shapiro Report recommended that religious schools receive direct public funding if they agreed to operate in "association" with local school boards. In return for the funding, the schools would have to agree to open their admissions, to hire certified teachers and to follow the provincial curriculum.

In a 2003 article published in *The Star*, Gerald Vandezande also pointed to the Edmonton model as an equitable way to provide funding for children of different faith communities while upholding provincial standards.

"An inclusive system recognizes that different people have different beliefs and have the legal right to live and educate in different ways," wrote Vandezande. "Good public policy ensures that all citizens and communities, with their various views of life and education, can exercise their legal equality rights and fundamental freedoms."

"It would develop mutually acceptable academic criteria, curriculum guidelines, teacher qualifications, admission policies, and health and safety standards," argued Vandezande. "All partners would respect the world views and core values that reflect our Canadian mosaic."

Such an approach might be more palatable to those who fear such schools might prove divisive and promote intolerance.

The recent *Star* article suggested that the model might not sit well with conservative evangelicals who want no government supervision of curriculum or teacher credentials.

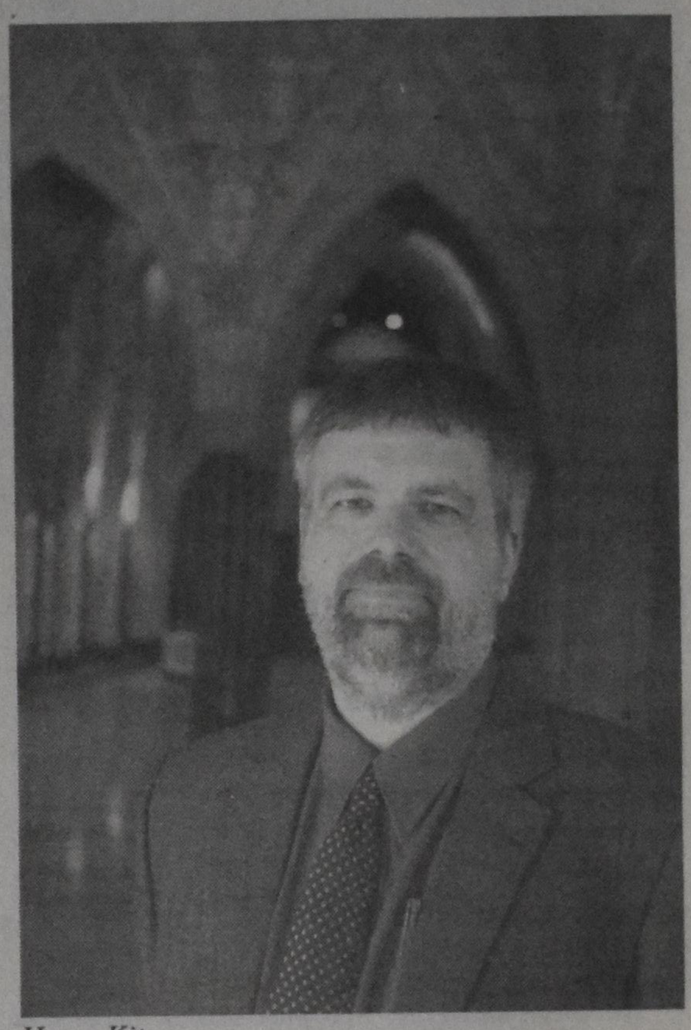
CPJ will be moving to the nation's capital

On July 1 Citizens for Public Justice will open offices in the national capital and move public justice front and centre.

"It's an exciting time for CPJ to go where it is needed," says Chair Dr. Janet Wesselius of Edmonton, Alberta. "CPJ is doing exceptional work on relevant and necessary issues, and we need to be where national public policy decisions are made."

"We're calling for a national poverty strategy. We're asking Canadians to welcome the stranger and reach out to newcomers so that they become neighbours. We're bringing a message of hopeful citizenship from our strong membership to Ottawa. And we're speaking from Ottawa about ideas that matter to Canadians," Wesselius declares passionately.

Wesselius spoke as the board of directors of Citizens for Public Justice approved a move that will see CPJ relocate its national offices to Ottawa.



Harry Kits

"The fact is, CPJ needs to be in Ottawa at this time," said Executive Director Harry Kits in a message to members in the fall issue of CPJ's newsletter, the Catalyst. "Public justice calls us to be where the conversations are happening, and to bring our more than 40 years of insight, analysis and tested positions.

"CPJ's focus is on federal issues and the issues that cut across and affect all the provinces. To create the kind of layered relationships with federal politicians, civil servants and other policy makers that allow for conversations around values, priorities and faith, you have to be where they are," he continues.

"This is particularly true when the national conversation can simplify policy issues, make easy assumptions about what it is to be Christian, and look for quick answers."

"I go so far as to say that CPJ is called to be in Ottawa at this time," Kits argues. "Our presence is needed there to speak to all parties and work to bring together different viewpoints in answers that serve the common good. CPJ will bring our particular understanding of Jesus' Gospel of love and compassion."

CPJ will continue to have a national reach. Kits has pledged that CPJ will look outwards to the rest of the country as much as it looks inwards to Ottawa.

"It is time to bring public justice front and centre. It is time to do that from Ottawa," he concludes.

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Nature/Opinion

In Flanders fields, they do not sleep

Harry Antonides

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

(John McCrae –1872- 1918)

I have been reluctantly dragged around to thinking that western democracies are not ready to do what's necessary, which is huge.

(Margaret Wente, commenting on the possibility of success in Iraq, *Western Standard*, November 6, 2006)

The recent victory of the Democrats in the U.S. midterm elections has put the leadership of that party in the driver's seat of the war in Iraq. The new reality is forcing President Bush to seek a consensus between two opposing viewpoints: staying the course, or leaving.

It has become evident that the situation in Iraq has deteriorated to such an extent that major changes in strategy are called for. The choice is stark: either destroy the terrorists or abandon the effort.

What now?

The newly elected Democratic Congressional majorities are determined to force President Bush to bring about the changes that amount to a total repudiation of the "Bush doctrine." They appear bent on demanding a timetable for the withdrawal of American troops. President Bush has opposed such an announcement because it would signal that America does not have the will to persevere in the face of murderous opposition.

Though President Bush and his newly empowered Democratic opposition have talked of cooperation and consensus building, the prospect of a strong and united American stand over against a determined enemy is now in doubt.

It is a very difficult to make sense of the developments in the Middle East, and it's easy to find fault with the conduct of the war. Here I want to zero in on what I see as two substantial difficulties faced by the current American leadership: internal division, and the West's failure to assess the true nature of radical Islam.

A divided nation is a crippled nation

The history of the war, beginning with the successful elimination of the Taliban in Afghanistan five years ago, has been marked by distrust and extreme antagonism toward the Bush administration. Initially, a traumatized nation by the shock of 9/11 was united in the need for a strong military response to that crime. But that unity soon deteriorated into a cause that has cut a deep rift through the heartland of America.

What has immensely added to the difficulties in waging this war is the character of the opposition, marked by bitterness and contempt. In fact, there were those who the day after 9/11 blamed their own country for this gruesome deed. (Noam Chomsky comes to mind.) As time went on the terrorists became more effective and the difficulties mounted, so did the opposition to the war in America.

Strong opposition to the Iraq war exists within the structures of the government itself, resulting in extensive investigations and hearings used by the Democrats to pin blame and undermine the Bush team. The 2004 presidential election campaign became a forum for Bush bashing. There is now even talk within the Democratic Party to impeach the President.

The "human rights" activists have been particularly active in opposing all efforts by the Justice Department to enact effective anti-terrorist legislation. The volume of the opposition to the war is amplified in the mainstream media, led by *The New York Times*. The latter has distinguished itself by publicizing the government's classified procedures of tracking the terrorists' financing and communication networks, thereby undermining the law enforcement efforts to protect the American people.

In addition, the American universities are hotbeds of anti-war rhetoric. The same thing can be said for the entertainment industry, of which Michael Moore's film *Fahrenheit 9/11 is* a particularly obnoxious example.

Knowing your enemy

One of the things that is striking about the war controversy is the refusal in the West to take at face value the declarations of war by the Osama bin Ladens of this world.

Many argue that the U.S.-led military action is responsible for the massive outbreak of daily killings and kidnappings in Iraq. They tend to forget that the stepped-up campaign of verbal and actual attacks on U.S. citizens and its military started more than 25 years ago.

The religiously loaded language of the Islamists is incomprehensible to most Westerners who pride themselves in having grown out of any kind of religious commitment. This is one reason why the western democracies are poorly prepared for the confrontation with those who have declared war on us in the name of Allah.

Here is a striking instance of such confusion: the American administration has treated Saudi Arabia as a friend and ally, whereas that country is the primary source of funding and leadership of an extensive and very effective network of Wahhabist mosques and other Islamic centres in all the western democracies. These places are serving as breeding and training bases for the foot soldiers and suicide bombers now aiming their deadly weapons at us.

A Sunday morning idyll, with horrific aspects

Flowers & Thistles
Curt Gesch

These all wait upon thee;
that thou mayest give them their meat in due season.

(Psalm 104:27–KJV)

It is a languorous Sunday morning. Betsey and I wake to the sounds of Angela Hewitt performing some elegant piece of piano music on Radio 2. The only discordant note is Chester, the Wonder Dog, barking and barking and barking.

I head downstairs for my ritualistic breakfast routine: set up coffee pot; start the bacon, read the Bible and pray, warm the frying pan, put toast in the toaster and then let the dog in.

While Chester races into the house I glance out the garage window and see ravens circling and landing about 150 metres behind the garden in the hayfield. And then a big, black animal. And something reddish in the snow. And another big, black animal. Two black wolves have just killed a deer. The wolves are immense; maybe 125-150 pounds each (metric just won't do for this).

I go upstairs to the balcony to look at them through the 10X binoculars and call Betsey. She looks and is sure they are bears. But they are wolves: beautiful, fully-furred, massive. (The Wonder Dog's pretensions to size are shown to be what they are.) The wolves half lope, half plow through the snow and disappear into the willows on the side of the west ridge.

*****

I have been teaching ecology to grade 5 and 6 students recently. We watched and discussed a National Geographic movie about the griffon vulture and how scavengers, predators, prey, water, fire, heat, insects, manure, and bones all work together to make the magic of the Serengeti.

We watched a lion kill a zebra. We watched vultures congregate along with ravens, kites, and storks; black-backed and golden jackals; hyenas. And ants, and horn beetles. It all fit together perfectly.

*****

While chickadees flitted merrily to the bird-feeder in the front yard, a deer (this year's fawn) went down beneath two wolves. Two wolves, bellies full, moved on. Then it was *our* scavengers' turn. Ravens clustered, croaked, hopped and waddled. They fought each other for scraps. Four magpies darted in for scraps the ravens missed or for "slushies" made of bloodied snow.

Two bald eagles sailed by and circled, checking things out. First they landed in the trees, then on the snow, and finally laid claim to the carcass. Ravens pestered them. The eagles (the immature one looking much like a griffon vulture from our distance) spread its wings to intimidate the ravens. One raven attacked another, losing

sight of the feast in the heat of competition. A chickadee, proving he was no civilized gentleman after all, grabbed a Tidbit a là Fawn.

From the ridge to the east, a calf moose and its closely-following mother, trot almost effortlessly through the deep snow past the carnage and disappear onto the west ridge near where the wolves disappeared from sight. The moose will be safe: full bellies, deep snow, and angry Mama Moose will work against any possible ideas the wolves may have.

The amount of red meat that I can see is rapidly decreasing. Ravens help decentralize the kill. Coyotes haven't yet appeared, but they will by nightfall if not sooner, to carry off scraps of hide and bone. *Our* ants are busy keeping warm in their snow-covered hills, but they'll take anything left over once spring arrives. We'll probably find deer hair mixed in with spruce needles on the ant mounds come April.

I recall that Mark Twain once said, "The wolf may lie down with the lamb, but no doubt he'll make it mighty warm for the lamb."

In honor of Remembrance Day, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past" is playing on Radio 2. I can almost hear the predators and scavengers singing their version of that song in voices without words.

But not the deer. I imagine the deer saying, "How long, O Lord, how long?"

Curt Gesch is doing long-term substitute teaching in Houston Christian School (BC) since September 8 due to an accident befalling one of the teachers. Mr. Gesch had retired from the teaching trade during the summer, but had exactly three days of retirement before returning to work.

Stewardship

In his new book, *America Alone*, Mark Steyn describes the case of Abdurahman Alamoudi who was jailed in 2003 for his involvement in the laundering of money from a Libyan terror-front "charity" into Syria via London. He is also the person who helped devise a three-week Islamic awareness course in California public schools, in which students adopt Muslim names, wear Islamic garb, memorize suras from the Koran, profess the Muslim faith, and recite prayers that begin "In the name of Allah," etc. Steyn explains:

The ninth Circuit Court of Appeals – the same court that ruled the Pledge of Allegiance unconstitutional because of the words "under God" – decided in this case that making seventh graders play Muslim for two weeks was perfectly fine, just an interesting exposure to a fascinating "culture" from which every pupil can benefit.

Alamoudi also served as an adviser on Islamic matters to Hillary Rodham Clinton. But the most shocking part of this story is that until 1998 Alamoudi certified Muslim chaplains for the United States military, under the aegis of the Saudi-funded American Muslim Armed Forces and Veterans Affairs Council. In 1993, he had installed the first imam in the military in a ceremony at a military base where he presented the new chaplain with an insignia of a silver crescent star.

There are many other instances of the failure to understand the true nature of the enemy we face. (For a detailed description of that truth, in addition to Mark Steyn, *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It*, see Melanie Phillips' *Londonistan*.)

We can argue forever whether it was right to unseat the tyrants in Afghanistan and Iraq. But now to abandon those who have relied on the American determination to defeat the terrorists will be experienced as a betrayal. For the second time in little over a decade Iraqis would be left defenceless over against ruthless killers.

The fallout of this betrayal will serve to strengthen Iran's determination to establish its dominance in the Middle East. Who is then going to stop Iran from making good its threat "to wipe Israel off the map"? Once the Americans withdraw, what will any one do to stop the Iranians from obtaining the nuclear bomb? For they know that they have nothing to fear from the U.N. or the International Atomic Energy Agency without strong American backing.

Perhaps worst of all, American withdrawal now will be seen as confirmation of Osama bin Laden's taunt that America is a paper tiger. The propaganda benefit for the jihadists will be enormous, not only in that part of the world, but it will provide new inspiration to the millions of Muslims now dispersed across the free world.

It is no comfort to say that many Muslims are not terrorists or haters of the West. True enough, but the moderates among them are mostly silent, because they are afraid or because too many still owe their first loyalty not to the country of which they are citizens but to the worldwide Islamic community– the Ummah.

Do not break faith

The bold initiative led by America to help establish a peaceful and civil order in Afghanistan and Iraq may well suffer shipwreck on the division within the U.S. The spirit of appeasement in Europe, forcing America to do all the heavy lifting, with a few exceptions, is making the outcome of the conflict in the Middle East all the more uncertain.

Yet history is full of surprises – some of them tragic. I fear that the free world will suffer further monstrous terrorist attacks before it faces the truth that it is confronted with enemies who cannot be pacified. Or perhaps the Democrats, faced with a new responsibility, will decide to cooperate with the Bush adminstration in forming a united front.

Though this does not appear very likely now, the tide can still be turned. But that will require a fundamental change, especially among the leadership of the free world. I pray that, by the grace of God, that may yet happen.

To that end, may we not "break faith" but hold high the torch passed to us from the "failing hands" of those who died so that we might live in freedom and with justice.

Harry Antonides
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Charitable year-end giving

Reflections on Stewardship

Rick De Graaf

This week I asked my colleague Patricia VanOostveen to help us with those last minute year-end giving decisions.

Connect with her if you have further questions (905-986-0221 or patriciav@csservices.ca).

"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's…and to God what is God's." Matt. 22:21

Like the Pharisees, who questioned Jesus as to whether to pay taxes or not, we struggle with this question as well. Maybe not whether we should, but how we can be good stewards of our money and pay the required amount of taxes owing.

For a financial planner, one of the hot issues is reducing taxes. It is not "tax season" at this time, but there are some things we can do before the end of the year to reduce our tax burden.

Review your non-registered investments

- If you have a high proportion of interest income, which is highly taxed, consider restructuring your portfolio with tax efficient income such as dividend income.
- Trigger accrued capital losses before the year-end if you have realized any capital gains in the past three years or this current year. The loss can also be carried forward to future tax years.
- Donate listed securities or mutual fund units to charity. Making a donation of your securities "in kind" by year-end will provide you with a donation credit. Any resulting capital gains on the donated securities will not be taxed.
- Contribute to your RESP. The deadline to contribute to a Registered Education Savings Plan is Dec. 31st. Take advantage of the government 20 per cent matching of the first $2000 contributed annually.

Review your registered investments

- Contribute to your RRSP early. Get your money working for you now rather than at the last minute in February.
- Contribute to a spousal RRSP. Contribute now and reduce the length of time that must pass before your spouse can make withdrawals that will be taxed in his or her hands.
- Withdraw funds from your RRSP if you have had a low-income year. This makes sense if you need the money and it would be taxed at a lower rate for this year.
- Convert your RRSP to RRIF if you are 69 years old. You must convert your RRSP by Dec. 31st in the year that you turn 69. If you are a couple, consider basing your withdrawal minimums on the younger partner's age.
- Buy an annuity to qualify for the pension credit. If you are over 65, consider using some of your RRSP dollars to purchase an annuity that will pay out $2000 annually which will take advantage of the pension credit.

General strategies

- Make expenditures such as union dues, professional memberships, childcare costs, medical expenses, interest costs, tuition costs and tax shelters before the year ends.
- Draw up next year's household budget. Review this past year's spending habits and adjust so your income is greater than your expenses.
- Donate to charity! If you want a receipt for your charitable donations, the deadline is Dec. 31st. Have you honoured your faith promise or pledge to your church? Will your favourite charity meet its budget this year? Think about donating now and consider an extra gift.

There are possibly many more things that you could do to reduce your taxes, so we advise that you contact your financial advisor or accountant for further information. Christian Stewardship Services encourages you to be the best stewards of what God has blessed you with, so give to Caesar what is Caesars' and give to God what is God's.

Stewardly Tip: It's cold again. Time to stock up on windshield antifreeze. How about a block heater to speed the warm up of your car, reduce emissions (an on-temperature engine runs cleaner and more efficiently) and wear and tear on your car? But do use a timer and set it so that it's only on for a maximum of 2 hours before your anticipated start time. Farmers and businesses with standby diesel engines or tractors for emergency power ought to consider a thermostatically controlled power outlet, which only turns the block heater on when the temperature drops below your set point. Remember block heaters are power consumers – but do save the environment and your money in the long run.

Readers: Share your Stewardly Tips so that we all can make better use of the resources God has entrusted to us. Submit your suggestions (by mail to Christian Courier or by email to my address below) and provide your contact information so that we can acknowledge your contribution or ask you for more details.

Next issue: Real Treasure

Rick DeGraaf works for Christian Stewardship Services in Markham, Ontario Rick's email: rickd@csservices.ca

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Church

Christian lecturer attacked in West Java, Indonesia

JAKARTA (Compass Direct News) – Muslim extremists in West Java attempted to murder a Christian lecturer in mid-October for converting from Islam three years ago. The lecturer at various theological schools, whose name was withheld for security reasons, has taken shelter in another province to escape further threats to his life.

Sources told Compass that in September a man claiming to be a Christian phoned the lecturer saying he wanted to study Islam in order to relate to his Muslim acquaintances. Several meetings followed in early October between the lecturer, the caller and several of the caller's friends.

On October 17, members of this group – whose names also were withheld – asked the lecturer to bring a selection of Christian books and cassettes and travel with them to Lembang, a small community on the outskirts of Bandung, a large town in West Java. The group asked the lecturer to take the front passenger seat in a small red van. En route, the men in the back seat slipped a rope over the lecturer's neck and attempted to strangle him. When he struggled, they hit him several times over the head with a hammer.

Streaming with blood, the lecturer managed to jump out of the car and roll downhill. Five minutes later, he reached a main road and began to ask passersby for help, without success. He eventually had to walk to the nearest police station, where he was referred first to a health clinic and then to a local hospital for treatment.

Police later discovered that the van driven by the extremists had crashed into another vehicle. Officers were able to arrest one of the men responsible for the attack, but the others escaped before police arrived. The group took a mobile phone and 800,000 rupiah (US$87) from the lecturer, but police believe this was an attempt to portray the intended death as the result of a violent robbery.

Churches struggling

At the same time, churches are struggling with a decree regulating houses of worship issued in March. Local Christians say the new provisions make it virtually impossible to obtain a church permit.

Under the revised regulation, congregations must meet several basic conditions before they can build or establish a church: proof of at least 90 existing members; the approval of 60 neighbors of different faith backgrounds; approval from civic authorities; and approval from newly established interfaith community forums (the Communication Forums for Religious Harmony). Building permits are also required for the construction of new churches.

The difficulties are illustrated by the case of a Seventh Day Adventist Messiah Church (GMAHK) in Bandung regency, West Java. The church, established in 1976, owns land and a building in Cisarua sub-district but has no building permit.

In November 2005, a mob entered the building while a service was underway and protested the presence of a church in the community. As a result, the church was forced to cease meeting, and the building was officially sealed. Members met in private homes for two weeks after the closure – but when the tension eased, they resumed services in the main building.

In April, a meeting was called between GMAHK leaders, Muslim clerics and civic officials, who gave the church three months to obtain a legal permit for a house of worship.

At a second meeting held on September 18, civil officials accused the church of using private homes for their worship activities and failing to obtain a permit.

Church leaders said they had met in private homes for two weeks only after the church closure last November. They also said it was impossible to complete the application process because the Bandung regency interfaith community forum had not yet been formed, and the non-existent body could not approve their application.

These arguments failed to persuade Islamic leaders, who insisted that the regional government permanently seal GMAHK's unregistered building before Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, began on September 24. Representatives from the Islamic Clerics Forum of Indonesia – a forum endorsed by 18 Islamic organizations – then staged a walkout.

With no clear alternatives, church members purchased a new plot of land about five kilometers (three miles) away from their existing building. Local authorities gave tacit approval, but Muslim groups objected on the grounds that there was a mosque in the neighborhood, saying church activities would disturb the Muslim community.

Muslim leaders then demanded that the church build their new facility in a nearby Seventh Day Adventist housing community. The managers, however, refused to provide space, claiming there was already a church in the community.

This situation clearly demonstrates the ongoing difficulties experienced by churches and other religious groups throughout West Java in obtaining permits for legitimate places of worship.

British Christians, Muslims unite to keep religion in Christmas

Martin Revis

London (ENI) – Britain's Christian Muslim Forum has strongly criticized moves to take the religious message out of Christmas in the country on the grounds that offence might be caused to members of other faiths.

The forum, launched in January by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, to promote interfaith relations, draws half its membership from the Muslim community.

It warned that attempts to remove religion from the Christmas festival acted to encourage right-wing extremism. Some local governments have tried to excise references to Christianity from Christmas. One renamed their municipal celebrations "Winterval".

The statement was signed by forum leaders including the Anglican Bishop of Bolton, David Gillett and Ataullah Siddiqui, director of the Markfield Institute of Higher Education. It noted that some local authorities had decided that Christmas should be called by another non-religious name.

"As Muslims and Christians together we are wholeheartedly committed to the retention of specific religious recognition for Christian festivals," their statement said, "Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and we wish this significant part of the Christian heritage of the country to remain an acknowledged part of national life. The desire to secularize religious festivals is offensive to both communities."

"Those who use the fact of religious pluralism as an excuse to de-Christianize British society unthinkingly become recruiting agents for the extreme right. They provoke antagonism towards Muslims and others by foisting on them an anti-Christian agenda they do not hold."

Some (Anglican) Church of England leaders have criticised the British Post Office for issuing Christmas stamps with no Christian theme. In a November 10 speech the Ugandan-born Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, considered as the second highest person in the Church of England hierarc[illegible]s stinking about the atheists, who under the cloak of s[illegible]ism, insist that religion must be a private matter."

Another Iraqi priest feared kidnapped

Peter Lamprecht

ISTANBUL (Compass Direct News) – Chaldean church leaders today said they fear that an Iraqi priest in Baghdad who has been missing for two days may have been kidnapped.

Chaldean priest Douglas Yousef Al-Bazy was last seen leaving his parish church by car after celebrating Sunday morning mass on Sunday (November 19).

"We haven't heard from him since after the mass," Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk Louis Sako told Compass by telephone from Kirkuk. "We don't know if it was an accident or if it was a kidnapping."

Al-Bazy, 34, is the parish priest at St. Elijah Church in Baghdad's Naariya district, Sako said.

Baghdad Auxiliary Bishop Andreas Abouna confirmed today that the Chaldean Patriarchate had received no news on the missing priest.

"He was in the north [of Iraq] for one week and came back last Saturday," Abouna told Compass by telephone from Baghdad. "He phoned me Saturday evening to say he was back in Baghdad, and that was the last call he made."

Both Abouna and Sako appealed to Christians around the world to pray for Al-Bazy's safe return.

In a possible reference to the same incident, *The New York Times* reported that "an elderly priest" was kidnapped yesterday in Baghdad's Naariya district. Archbishop Sako told Compass that he had received no news of a second disappearance.

At least four Christian clergymen have been kidnapped in Iraq since July. Al-Bazy may be the fifth.

Iraqi Christians have told Compass that kidnappings and forced donations to violent Islamic militias are a weekly occurrence for the country's Christian community.

"My cousin had to pay $10,000, my brother-in-law paid $20,000 and I paid $9,000," one Chaldean source who requested anonymity recently told Compass in northern Iraq. "Last week the Islamic groups bombed three Christian houses because the owners refused to pay."

This past week, an Assyrian Church of the East priest from Mosul's St. Mary Church was forced to flee to the Kurdish region because he was unable to continue paying the forced donations, Assyrian International News Agency reported.

According to the agency, the church's administrative director, Edward Enwiya, his brothers, and an Ancient Assyrian Church of the East priest from the neighboring village of Telkaif had been forced north for the same reason.

Many of Iraq's Chaldeans believe that attacks on Christians are not carried out randomly, according to Chaldean Auxiliary Bishop of Baghdad Shleman Warduni.

Extremists "target those people who are most involved in the Christian community, the younger and more courageous ones," the bishop told Catholic news service Asia News. It's "as if to give a warning to those who persist in hoping that they will be able to continue living in the country."

In October an Islamic militant ring beheaded a Syrian Orthodox priest from Mosul, 59-year-old Boulos Iskander, after demanding that the city's churches post signs denouncing a speech made by Pope Benedict XVI in which he implied that Islam was inherently violent.

In September, Father Basil Yaldo, rector of St. Peter's Seminary in Baghdad, was kidnapped and released only days later. In two other separate incidents, two young Chaldean priests were kidnapped and eventually released in July and September.

Due to Iraq's ongoing sectarian violence and attacks specifically targeting the Christian community, some groups estimate that the number of Christians in the country has dropped to 450,000 or fewer, down from 850,000 in 1991.

Chaldean Catholics, an Eastern rite church in communion with Rome, are the largest Christian community in Iraq.

Church

Lutheran and Reformed governing bodies hold first joint meeting

Geneva (ENI) – Governing officers of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), have met for the first time in a joint session, both church groupings said in a joint statement.

At that meeting, the executive committee members of the LWF, which represents some 66 million Lutherans, and the officer of WARC, with about 75 million Reformed Christians in its fold, recommended that a new type of ecumenical assembly be considered to take place in 2013. This would bring together groupings of churches currently based in Geneva, including the World Council of Churches (WCC), the LWF and WARC.

Commenting on the meeting's outcome, the Lutheran federation president, US Bishop Mark Hanson said, "We have strengthened our relationship with one another."

WARC president, the Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick said, "We celebrate the growing unity we find among Reformed and Lutheran Christians and leave this historic meeting with great hope that our organizations will be able to strengthen one another."

These WCC, the Lutheran federation and the Reformed alliance have, in many instances, overlapping membership of one another and their main governing bodies meet at separate venues and at different locations about once every seven years. All three church groupings are headquartered in Geneva's Ecumenical Centre.

The Reformed and Lutheran leaders also urged the WCC, which represents about 550 million Christians worldwide make a decision on this matter at the next meeting of its main governing body, its central committee in 2008. They also asked that the general secretaries of WARC and the LWF meet to discuss the issue with their counterpart in the WCC.

Both governing bodies considered that after 2010, "the LWF and WARC would no longer hold global assemblies of their own, given a satisfactory development in this area."

The Lutheran federation's general secretary, the Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko, described the November 18 meeting as "a concrete translation of our mutual commitment to the search for visible unity. This meeting will give energy to our constituencies."

His counterpart in WARC, the Rev. Setri Nymoi said: "I am happy that both Lutheran and Reformed representatives expressed a commitment to our common witness and action for justice and peace as it is lived out daily in many regions of the world."

Russian Patriarch censures Protestants; denies closer Catholic ties

Jonathan Luxmoore

Warsaw (ENI) – Russia's Orthodox Patriarch has accused Protestant churches of what will any [illegible] at the same time denying that [illegible] is now closer to Roman Catholics as a result.

"This vision of modern Protestantism is the consequence of a particularly worrying permissive spirit which reigns in the bosom of Western secular society with a laxity and liberalism which pervade everything," said Patriarch Alexei II in an interview with France's Paris Match magazine.

The Orthodox condemned current Protestant practices, such as the ordination of women and homosexuals, and the blessing of same-sex marriages, and hoped for a "common front" with Roman Catholics in "defending and affirming traditional Christian values".

He denied, however, that "concrete changes" had occurred in Orthodox-Roman Catholic ties, and said serious problems needed tackling before closer contacts became possible.

"We salute the new Pope's declarations about the need to pursue dialogue, and we hope they'll be followed by acts. But for the moment, unfortunately, the Catholic church is pursuing its proselytism in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, by seeking to convert to Catholicism people baptised into Orthodoxy," Alexei said.

Representatives of the Vatican and the Moscow Patriarchate met in Vienna in May to discuss "giving Europe a soul," while a Joint International Commission for Catholic-Orthodox Theological Dialogue also convened in Belgrade in September.

Still, in his interview, the Patriarch said Roman Catholic missionaries had opened orphanages in Russia to "raise Orthodox children in the Catholic religion", noting that Greek Catholics in Ukraine had been "particularly aggressive and discriminatory" towards Orthodox Christians.

The Patriarch said 80 per cent of Russia's 143 million inhabitants were now believed to be baptized Christians and his church now had 27,000 places of worship in the country, four times as many as in the late 1980s.

He said he had "never excluded" a possible meeting with the Pope. "If this meeting took place, perhaps in a third country, it would be an exceptional, historic event," Alexei told Paris Match. "But it must be rigorously prepared and have as its first objective, improved relations and exchanges between our churches."

WCC leader Samuel Kobia visits church in China

On the second day of a visit to China (November 15-22), World Council of Churches general secretary Rev. Dr Samuel Kobia characterized Christianity in the country as being "rooted in the soil" and suggested that the WCC's member church in the country needs to interpret itself and the story of the church in China.

"Until we see how people live in a rural situation, we really can't get to know what a country is all about," Kobia told a group of more than a thousand parishioners gathered at the Qian Deng Church, built on land provided by the local government in rural Kunshan.

Despite heavy rains on their second day in China, Kobia and members of the WCC delegation were warmly welcomed by a colourful brass band and throngs of well-wishers waiting on the steps of the newly built church.

The delegation was also given an overview of the dramatic transformation of the area's 2,500-year agrarian history by the local pastor, who described the impact of the newly developed industrialized society on the lives of the people in nearby Suzhou city.

The delegation later visited Suzhou Industrial Park, recognized as one of the fastest-growing industrial development zones in the world, where a joint venture of Chinese and Singapore governments and multi-national corporations are trying to reap the benefits of globalization.

Rooted in Chinese soil and history

Earlier in the day, Kobia met with local pastors and the leadership and staff of the Shanghai Christian Council, who credited the phenomenal growth of the church in China to its close identification with the Chinese people.

"The church is now rooted in Chinese history," said Rev. Cao Shengjie, president of the China Christian Council (CCC), which is a member of the WCC since 1991. Cao also made a favourable assessment of the current situation of her church in comparison with its experience in the past.

While in 1949 there were 700,000 Christians in China, today members of congregations that make up the CCC number 16 million, and belong to more than 55,000 local churches, with 18 seminaries and Bible schools, and some 2,700 ordained pastors and associate pastors.

"In many parts of the world," Kobia reflected, "the roots of Christianity haven't gone down deep enough. We are learning, here, what it means for Christianity to be rooted in the soil rather than in a clay pot. You have broken the clay pot and now the roots of Christianity are really deeply planted in the soil."

Responsibilities and challenges

Kobia noted, however, that the phenomenal growth of Christian congregations brings with it a great responsibility in society. "This phenomenal growth is observable to the whole world, because China is developing into a major global power. How will that shape the challenge of the churches' witness?"

Local Shanghai area pastors emphasized that in this post-denominational period, the focus has been on what Christians have in common, while still recognizing and respecting differences. "Because we are reconciled with God, we should have good relations with other people. Striving for harmony and unity has always been an important part of Chinese tradition."

Among the challenges facing the CCC, church leaders in Shanghai mentioned the concern to meet the needs of the growing churches, particularly pastoral care for younger intellectuals who are expressing interest in Christianity. Some 42 per cent of Christians belonging to the CCC are now under the age of 40 as compared with 28 per cent just a few years ago.

Given the growing influence of the market economy in China, local church leaders also expressed concern about the temptations of power and wealth, and the need to emphasize Christian ethics in society. "Man does not live by bread alone," said Cao. "To be light and salt in the world, to glorify God and benefit the people" is a popular saying among Christians in China.

In respect to the challenges facing the CCC, Kobia lifted up "the challenge to 'self-communicate' rather than allowing others to interpret the story of the church in China." He also suggested consideration of three additional "self" principles: self-understanding, self-representation and self-articulation.

The head of the Anglican communion, Archbishop Rowan Williams also visited China a few weeks earlier. Like Kobia, he met only with leaders of the government approved Three-self Church.

After Williams' visit, Human Rights Watch said he should have raised concerns about restrictions on practising religion during his two-week visit. House church leaders and members have long been harassed, beaten and imprisoned in the country for refusing to become part of the government sanctioned body. Most house church leaders accuse the Three-Self Church of also pushing a government approved theology.

International rights groups also pointed out that China has recently jailed Catholic priests as well as Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns for loyalty to the Pope and the Dalai Lama.

But Lambeth Palace said Dr Williams did not want to jeopardize the safety of Christians in China.

Both church leaders seemed to make similar "engineered visit with the standard glossing over of the problems there," to use the words of Human Rights Watch.

Chinese officials have expressed interest in the role of religion in improving society, Archbishop Williams said at the end of his trip.

Church growth

The simple truth about church growth (Part 3)

David Snapper

(See Sept. 25 & Nov. 20 issues for parts 1 & 2)

Rural congregations over-taken by the expanding city

What discussion of church growth would be complete without notice of the North American suburb! I included two charts to present the effects of changes in environment for two Grand Rapids area congregations – Cutlerville (I) and Walker.

Both congregations began their ministries as small rural congregations. Today we whiz from Calvin College to Cutlerville in just a few minutes, driving fast cars from Germany and Japan with leather seats. Our forefathers were more fortunate. They spent a relaxing day on the actual horse, or on a train, often hiking through frozen mud and slogging long distances in terrible weather.

The point is that a distance of twenty miles meant true separation before 1930 and before cheap, reliable cars. Notice that Cutlerville and Walker have the slow to flat membership patterns of rural congregations because they were rural, even though they are near to Grand Rapids.

As Grand Rapids expanded during the 1920's and 1930's, however, the growth patterns changed. Cutlerville especially takes on the look of a Hothouse Church that is siphoning members out of the city.

Notice that one of the earlier charts, Cutlerville East CRC shows as its start date about 1950. Notice also that the growth graph of Cutlerville First gives no indication of the nearby congregation growing at the rate of nearly 30 families per year! Both congregations were growing rapidly. No more rural church for Cutlerville!

That's what can happen when a rural church is overtaken by a nearby city.

Greetcha and Mary will be mistaken if they believe that any pastor can cause such a change. The urban area of Grand Rapids, spilling over into rural Cutlerville is the underlying cause for the dramatic changes in the growth of Cutlerville First and Cutlerville East – and all their children.

Pathologies

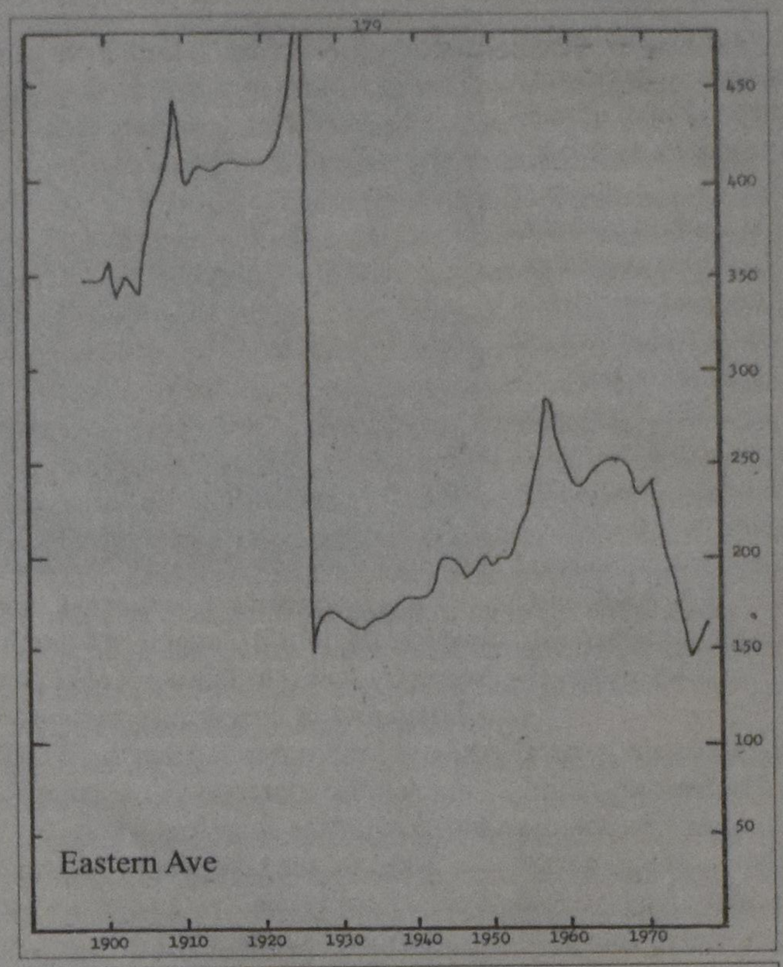
Personality problems

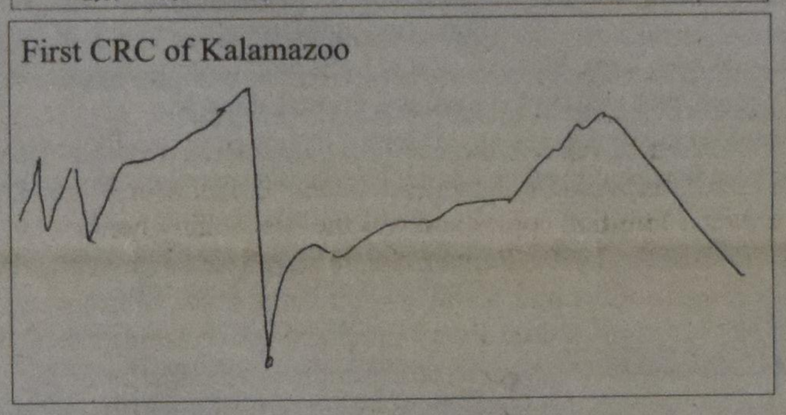
Greetcha and Mary both are right that pastors can sometimes play significant roles in church growth. Both Dominee Watson Groen and Dominee Herman Hoeksema played dramatic roles at Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church of Grand Rapids.

In its prime (1924) Eastern Ave. numbered more than 2000 members. Its anniversary booklet noted that elders were deputized to keep order among the (forgive me) "immigrant" teen boys in the balcony. That is a big church.

Herman Hoeksema split the church by taking his personal and theological issues into the congregation. The chart of Eastern Ave. tells us what one pastor accomplished.

The second graph is of First CRC of Kalamazoo, some





50 miles distant. The similarity in church growth patterns is a sobering reminder of the damage that can be done by a pastor.

Our point here is to notice the under-noticed aftermath of the Protestant Reformed split in 1924/25. Notice that the congregation continued to grow at about the same rate as before.

Here we observe that the environmental growth dynamics of both congregations outlast and overpower the effects of even towering figures like Hoeksema and Danhof.

If Mary and Greetcha wish to talk about the greatness of preachers, let them discuss the years following the split when strong leadership held a broken church together and encouraged ongoing ministry after the worst and most bitter breakup of CRC history.

It's a shame that we remember only the good Dss. Groen and the mistrusting Hoeksema when we also should honor the subsequent pastors: W.P. Van Wyk, C. Huisen, W. Haverkamp, M.D. Hugen, and V. Geurkink who pastured the church to health and vitality.

This chart represents the darkest experience of a church – an emotional, theologically-charged split of denomination-wide notoriety. Pray that you are never in such a congregation. And if this happens to a neighboring church, pray that you can have the spiritual heart to faithfully support this broken group of brothers and sisters.

Social disorders

No one really wants to say what needs to be said about race relations. We would rather avoid the issue altogether in hopes that passive avoidance will equate to non-culpability.

In the CRC of the United States, race played a significant role at times. One of those times was the 1960's. For the ten or fifteen years after WWII the United States experienced social reconfigurations especially in the urban African-American population.

Even Banner editor H.J. Kuiper, probably very representative of the CRC and of most Anglos in the US, strongly favored policies of racial segregation. He wrote vigorously in support of racial segregation.

Most members of Roseland I, II, III and IV moved from Roseland (Chicago area) to the suburbs in the late 1960's, leaving four essentially vacant buildings with seating for 3000 souls.

This pattern of behavior has a variety of components and descriptions – though "suburbanization" and "urban flight" are the most common.

This brings us to a subject that I will mention in passing. These four churches are not four One-Generation Wonders. The four congregations of Roseland represent a "system" of congregations with at least 3000 members. At 3000 souls, these four congregations comprise the number of persons needed to make a rural village.

Note that none of the congregations exhibited signs of the Death Spiral. Rather, there were enough spouse candidates, employment opportunities and "critical mass" that these 3000 souls could have continued for decades.

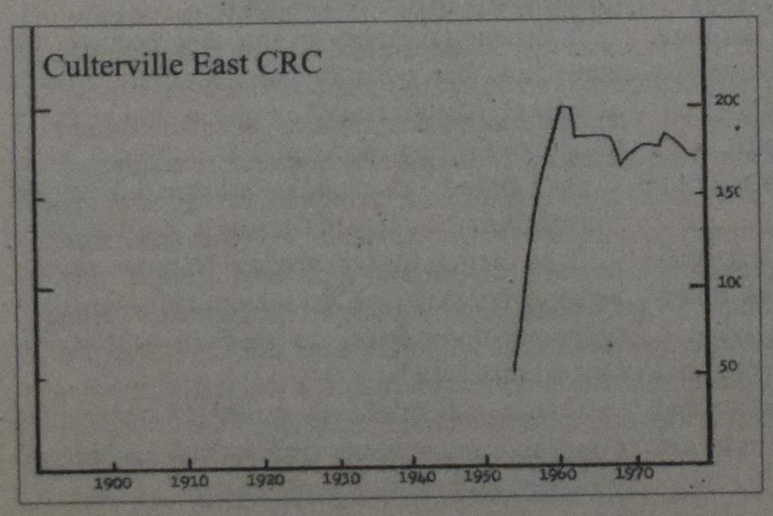
Unlike the One-Generation Wonder which folds for lack of living members, the congregation of the Social Disorder folds by intention and by choice.

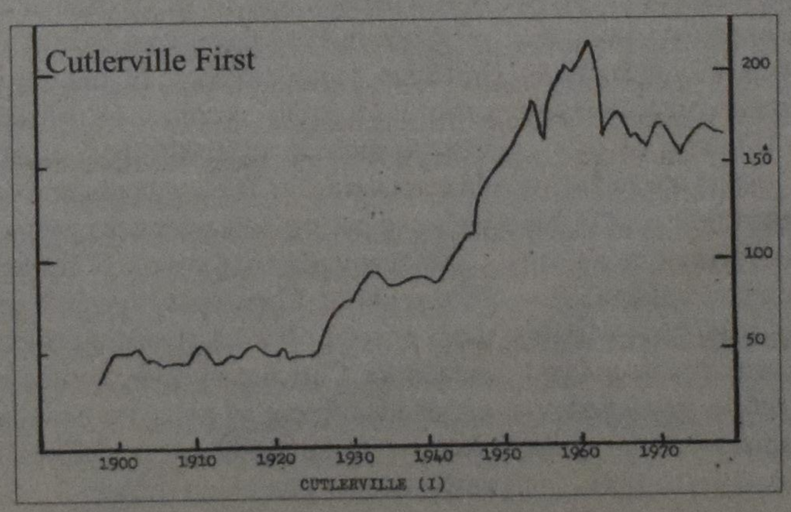
Choice is what characterizes the Social Disorder. By this term I mean to say that the Social Order that had existed has now changed. Perhaps you would prefer a "Re-Ordering" of the social structure.

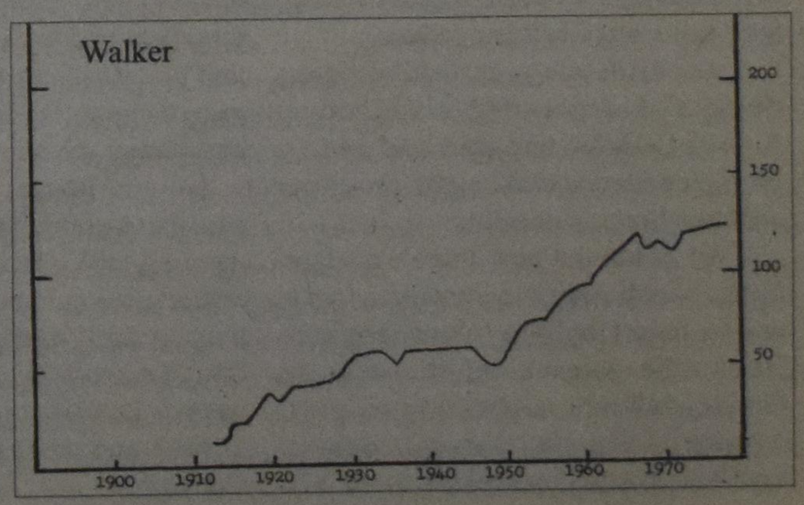
Whether we agree or disagree with the decisions of these congregations remains irrelevant for, in context, there were probably no realistic alternatives. Their choice, at the time, was understood to be the only option available. We should let it rest at that.

Greetcha and Mary, not in their wildest imaginations, could suppose that a pastor or praise band could have changed this scenario.

Continued on p.19...







Social ethics

Listening to the heartbeat of God

Mark Vander Vennen

It's hard to open a newspaper or listen to a newscast these days without being overwhelmed by a series of worsening global gridlocks. Global warming, terrorism and global poverty rank among the most serious. With global warming, there is now an almost complete consensus among thousands of international scientists that unless we in the West cut way back on our use of fossil fuels, there will be catastrophic consequences for the earth.

But that means fundamentally changing our patterns of consumption and production and globalization – in other words, the very structures of our society. Similarly, 1 billion of the world's 6 billion people live in crushing poverty, while 24,000 people die each day from hunger, even as the world generates astonishing amounts of wealth.

When it comes to terrorism, the Pentagon reports that Iraq is now sliding into an abyss of violence, suicide bombing seems unstoppable, and not long ago bomb plots were foiled in Toronto and England. Meanwhile, we've just witnessed horrific devastation in Lebanon and Israel, and the situation in Afghanistan seems increasingly tenuous.

Gospel answers?

That is not an easy list to digest. The question I find myself asking is: does the Gospel have anything to say about these looming crises? Is the Gospel just about the relationship between Jesus and me? Or does it actually contain a message of reconciliation, of hope for the world?

I can't find an easy answer. I also hope that we resist the temptation to give an easy answer. Quick and easy answers are usually cheap and unhelpful. Further, I find it especially challenging to answer this question today. More and more people now associate Christians and Christianity with contributing to and even sanctioning problems like global warming and escalating terrorism. And the sad truth is that in some instances they are correct. Indeed, how do we, as Christ-followers, speak to others and to ourselves about the claims of the Gospel when some of the world's crises are actively encouraged by brothers and sisters in Christ in the name of Christ?

Rapture theology

What do I mean by that? Let me answer by way of introducing a very dear friend, a woman in her 70s whom I've known all my life. She wrote me not long ago from Florida. In her letter she wonders if we are now living in the end times. She muses about whether Christ will return at any moment. She's been thinking about the re-establishment of the state of Israel after World War 2 and its place in the Second Coming of Jesus. She's reading in Genesis 16-18 of a curse that says that the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael will always be in conflict – descendants who, in her mind, are now modern-day Jews and Arabs. She's thinking that the increase in conflict between Jews and Arabs is a sign that Christ's return is imminent and that the recent terrorist events are fulfilling Jesus' statement that there will be wars and rumours of war shortly before his return. She's also fascinated by the fall of Babylon in the book of Revelation and wondering what it means that ancient Babylon was located in what is now Iraq.

In response, I wrote her a story. In the early 1980s I belonged to a group called Christian Peacemakers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This was at the height of the Cold War and the nuclear arms race. We've largely forgotten the palpable fear that the world lived under 25 years ago. The entire earth could have been destroyed many times over at about ten minutes notice. That's still the case today: even now the world could be destroyed several times over by nuclear weapons at about ten minutes notice. Back then the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists moved the famous Doomsday Clock to three minutes to midnight, to symbolize how close the world was to total destruction. Robert Jay Lifton, then a visiting psychiatrist at Harvard, found in a survey that something like 80 per cent of American young people did not expect to live out the full course of their lives, due to the likelihood of a nuclear catastrophe.

Christian Peacemakers regularly undertook nonviolent activities at Rockwell International in Pittsburgh, which was then the third largest military contractor in the United States. Some of the most advanced weaponry used in the Vietnam war was designed there. Often at Rockwell someone would walk up to me and say, "I see from your literature that you're a Christian. Well, I'm a Christian too and I believe that by working at Rockwell and by building nuclear weapons I am helping to speed up the apocalypse." That is an exact quote, and it was repeated frequently. We met with Larry Norman, who many consider the father of contemporary Christian music. He proudly told us that he had never voted in a US election, but he chose to vote for Ronald Reagan in 1980, because President Reagan would help to "speed up the apocalypse."

These comments reflect "rapture" theology. According to rapture theology, when Christ returns Christians will be "raptured" up to meet Jesus in the sky and go to heaven with him while the earth and all unbelievers are completely destroyed below. The destruction would be by nuclear holocaust, and the Christians at Rockwell were doing their part to help this along. They were helping to speed up Christ's return by creating the tools for the total destruction of the earth.

This form of rapture theology was popularized by Hal Lindsay in his book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which has sold over 10 million copies and was the best-selling nonfiction book of the 1970s. Rapture theology is based on a very specific view of the role of the modern nation-state of Israel in Christ's return, and on a very specific way of reading the book of Revelation. It became less prominent after the 1980s, because Hal Lindsay, using numbers from the book of Revelation, had very precisely predicted that Christ would return by 1988. His prediction proved to be wrong.

Today we are again inundated with serious global crises. My dear friend is wondering if these crises mean that we're living in the end times, and she's using some rapture theology to think about them. Rapture theology is becoming popular again – just as young people are again beginning to question whether they will live out the full course of their lives, due to some catastrophic terrorist event. The hugely popular Left Behind series is steeped in rapture theology (and its 70 million copies sold make Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins the best-selling American authors ever). Late-night TV evangelists and radio preachers preach with a certain glee about the rise of both Islamist jihad and the state of Israel. They claim that the Bible prophesies that for Jesus to return Israel must first regain its original Old Testament borders, which include portions of today's Iraq. Reconciliation with Palestinians is thus wrong and unbiblical – and therefore to be opposed. Preachers espousing these viewpoints preach every evening on all of our TVs and radios. In other words, sadly, once again one can only admit that prominent Christians are again in the age-old business of supporting, encouraging and even sanctioning horrific abuse and violence in the name of God.

How then do we, as Christ-followers, speak to others about the claims of the Gospel in an environment where others who claim the Gospel explicitly exacerbate some of today's crises in the name of the Christian God?

Jesus down to earth

My experience at Rockwell drove me deeply into Scripture. I needed something to say to my friends at Rockwell because they were, and still are, my brothers and sisters in Christ.

It is not possible to explore here all of the rich material in Scripture about war and peace and about Christ's return. But I wish to make two points.

First, in my reading, the overwhelming picture given by the Bible, including the Gospels, the New Testament letters and the book of Revelation, is one of heaven and of Jesus coming down to the earth. Christ at last makes his dwelling among us on a renewed earth. We do not go up; Christ comes down. When it says in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 that we will "meet Jesus in the air" (a favourite proof-text of rapture theology) the Greek word used there is a specific word used for when the inhabitants of a capital city rush outside of the city gates to greet their victorious king who is returning home from battle, and they usher him into his home. The image suggested is that we will greet Jesus and usher him and the forces of heaven to their rightful home: a refreshed, purified and renewed earth.

Secondly, the apostle Paul, in Romans, addresses the issue of Israel specifically. Anti-Semitism was already rearing its ugly head in the Roman church, and Paul uses the first 11 chapters of Romans partly to confront this problem. Some Gentiles in the Roman church felt that the Gentiles were now the true church because Jesus had been rejected by – literally killed by – the Jews. Through a brilliant use of Scripture, Paul shows that God keeps his word to the Jews, that both Jew and Gentile are one in Christ, and that the Jews have an irreversible, special place in the heart of God. Gentile Christians have no grounds for excluding Jews from the body of Christ because of race or group identity reasons – the very reasons, Paul implies, that some among the Jews stumbled in relation to Christ. Regrettably, many Christians did not pick up on this message from Paul, and throughout the ages, at least up until World War 2, oppression of the Jews by Christians has been some of the worst racial oppression in history.

In Romans 10:5-13, as part of his argument against anti-Semitism, and using the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 30: 11-16), Paul says something simple but profound (verse 6): "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven'? (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the deep'? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart."

Paul is saying that we already have been given all that we need to know to have life, to live it abundantly and to face the future. We don't need to ascend into heaven to bring Christ down; we don't need to descend into the depths to bring Christ up. We ought not to go beyond ourselves and claim heavenly knowledge, knowledge that is reserved for God. We ought not to manipulate things in order for Christ to return. Manipulating Christ's return is arrogant and selfish; it meets our own needs for security, not God's needs, and it only leads to destruction. Today, it leads to a portion of the Body of Christ supporting and approving of military devastation and destruction in the Middle East that would never be approved of in another context.

Islamist suicide bombers, such as the 9/11 terrorists, are promised 70 virgins when they die. Their motivation, of which the virgins is just a part, is pure self-interest. Rapture theology is also driven by self-interest: we will be rescued and protected from the utter destruction; all of the others will die. I am struck by the similarity between two images: 1) the Twin Towers exploding in an awful fire of total destruction, while the bombers are rescued by Allah and given 70 virgins; 2) the earth consumed in an awful fire of total destruction, while those who participate in the destruction are rescued and held safe by God forever. Both of these are self-interested attempts to manipulate God, with horrific, even unspeakable consequences for others.

These mirror images show the way of the world. The

Continued on p. 14

Advent

Advent Devotions

Marian Van Til

(See the Nov. 20 issue for Advent I, Days 1-6)

Advent I, 7th Day

Sat., Dec. 9 Isaiah 4:2-6; 1 Thess. 4:13-18; Luke 21:5-19; Psalms 90 and 72

The second Sunday of November was set aside by many Christian churches and organizations as a day to pray for the persecuted church. Jesus tells us we *will* be persecuted if we follow him. There are, of course, different kinds and levels of persecution; but should it not give us pause when we consider that we Christians in the West suffer very little persecution, or none at all?

These passages speak in various ways of the last days, and then of Christ's consummated Kingdom. Regarding the last days (which Reformed theologians, among others, interpret as having begun with Christ's finished work on earth), Jesus issues warnings to his disciples, and to us. He lists the now familiar signs of the end of the age: nation rising against nation, wars and revolutions, great earthquakes, famines, pestilences, fearful events and great signs from heaven. He tells his disciples that even before all that, "they [deceivers who come falsely in Christ's name] will lay hands on you and persecute you." But the good news is that our suffering will never be in vain: "This will result in your being witnesses to them."

Even so, I've been asking myself whether I will have the courage to be that kind of witness, to endure the kinds of things the apostles and early Christians endured for the name of Christ. Maybe you've wondered that about yourself. But according to Jesus we needn't second-guess ourselves. "Make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21: 14). He may require much of us, even the laying down of our lives. But he will never forsake us. He tells us, "By standing firm you will gain life."

O Christ! Remove our advent fears. Bolster our hope, excite our cheers.
Bring on full life both new and free. Trumpet at last the jubilee!

Advent II

Sun., Dec. 10 Isaiah 5: 1-7; 2 Peter 3:11-18; Luke 7:28-35; Psalms 25 and 150

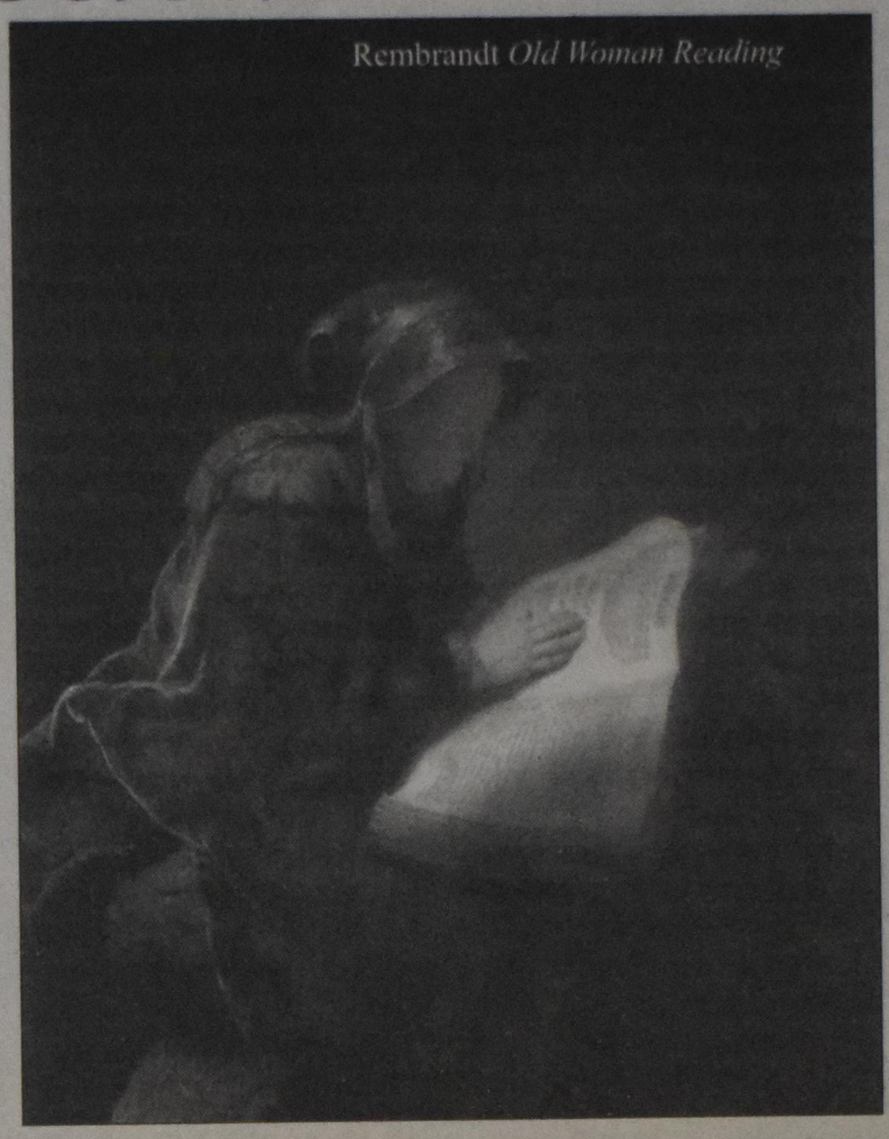
The readings throughout Advent, today too, contain frequent juxtapositions between what Scripture calls righteousness and unrighteousness: between the lives of integrity, holiness and thankfulness of those who love and serve God, and the destructive, careless, unstable lives of those who ignore or willfully reject God and the Salvation he offers us.

In the Isaiah verses God himself sings a "Song of the Vineyard," lamenting over his people's unfaithfulness to him. God, jilted lover. (Do *we* ever jilt him?) So God sends his Son, but the Son, arrived in our own flesh and blood, doesn't match our expectations. In Luke, that Son chides the crowds and their religious leaders alike for their fickle rejection of both John the Baptist and himself. John neither ate bread nor drank wine and you say he has a demon, Jesus tells them. I came eating and drinking and you call me a glutton and a drunk! God jilted again.

Peter, in his first epistle, gives us the perspective we need so that we will remain faithful to the God we love (consider that monogamy and monotheism have something in common). Last Sunday as Advent dawned, Peter told us that though the Lord is patient, his patience will one day run out: the Day of the Lord will come like a thief, so be prepared! Today Peter tells us how: "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.... Make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him." (Psalm 25 has more to say about living rightly.)

Note that Peter says that *our* right living will even speed the day of Christ's return. (How amazing is that!) That's because *our* example will cause others to come to him. So the Day of the Lord causes no fear but is one we look forward to; a day that will bring about a new heaven and a new earth, our glorious post-resurrection home. Then we can forever forget about Advent and Advent's constant juxtaposition between righteousness and unrighteousness, because only righteousness will live there – and the Sun of Righteousness himself! Here and now, though, Psalm 150 can help us voice our thanks and praise for so great a salvation:

Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!



Rembrandt *Old Woman Reading*

Mon., Dec. 11 Isaiah 5:8-17; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; Luke 21:20-28; Psalms 145 and 40

Your redemption is drawing near. We usually think of that phrase in connection with the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah. But in Luke, Jesus himself uses the phrase about his *second* coming. He is continuing his discourse with his disciples about the signs of the end of the age. All of today's readings force us, again, to consider that time.

It will not be a comfortable time, or anything close to it. "Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world...," Jesus warns. But then – then! – he says, "They [those apprehensive and terror-struck people] will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." And what then? "When these things begin to take place stand up and lift up your heads, because *your redemption is drawing near*"!

In this fallen world we Christians always live with the tension of the already-but-not-yet of our redemption. Christ has redeemed us and all creation: he came as one of us, suffered, died, rose again and ascended to the right hand of God in order to accomplish that. Yet the final effects won't be felt until his second coming. So we wait – with longing – for the Day when our redemption will be complete. In the meantime, we can still confidently say with Psalm 145, "Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations."

The King shall come when morning dawns and light and beauty brings.
Hail, Christ the Lord! Your people pray: come quickly, King of kings.

Tues., Dec. 12 Isaiah 5:18-25; 1 Thess. 5:12-28; Luke 21:29-38; Psalms 146 and 94

The readings today remind us why our human race so desperately needs a Saviour; and why we need to remain vigilant until he comes again. Arrogance, bribery, oppression of the vulnerable, and gross self-indulgence are hallmarks of "the wicked": those who disregard God, his law and his offered salvation and become a law and a god unto themselves.

In frustration, the author of Psalm 94 calls on God as judge to give such people their comeuppance: "Pay back to the proud what they deserve," he pleads. "How long will the wicked be jubilant?" Then he turns to the people whose corruption so disturbs him: Do you really think you're going to get away with this forever? Do you think that the God who formed the eye and implanted the ear can't see and hear what you're doing? Isaiah, too, warns that woe will come upon those "who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness..., who are wise in their own eyes..., who are champions at mixing drinks"! Such a disturbingly mixed up, upside-down world is the eventual but inevitable result of erasing God from the picture (or trying to).

"But we who confess Christ aren't like that," you protest. "We're like that righteous psalmist who was so tired of all the God-ignoring dishonesty, corruption and hedonism he saw around him every day." True: if you love God's Word and commandments you may align yourself with the psalmist, with those God deems "the righteous." Yet that very frustration and yearning for God to act, the longing for him to return and finally make all things new, can catch us up if we're not careful. Jesus, still talking with his disciples about the nearing of that Day, warns, "Be careful, or your hearts will be weighted down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap."

If the disciples needed that clear warning about spiritual complacency, surely we do too. As Paul tells the Thessalonians, let this be our prayer: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it."

He comes to judge the nations, a terror to his foes,
A light of consolations and blessed hope to those
Who love the Lords' appearing.
O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth your beams so cheering and guide us safely home.

Wed., Dec. 13 Isaiah 6:1-13; 2 Thess. 1:1-12; John 7:53-8:11; Psalms 50 and 17

Isaiah has a vision of God on his throne. The prophet is utterly dismayed, stricken with his own unworthiness in the presence of the great God of the universe. God's holiness is absolute and his glory fills the whole earth. On the other hand, Isaiah's – and our

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– contamination by sin is through-and-through. Isaiah feels doomed. But one of the six-winged seraphs who chants a wondrous song of God's holiness and glory puts a live coal to the prophet's lips. "Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for," Isaiah is assured. Long before in these pre-Messiah days, during Moses's time, God had set aside a Day of Atonement for his people. On that day a censor full of burning coals was to be taken into the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle when sacrifice was made to atone for sin (Lev. 16: 12). Isaiah would have recognized the symbolism. He not only experiences forgiveness of sins, but he quickly responds in willingness and obedience – "Here am I" – when God asks, "'Whom shall I send?' to carry my Word?"

Now let's jump ahead to Jesus's time on earth. The religious leaders have caught a women committing adultery. In line with their times, they aren't concerned about her partner's sin, but they are incensed at *her* transgression and are about to stone her (the Old Testament penalty for adultery). We all know the story. Jesus perceives their self-righteousness and hypocrisy: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" (and surely it was a command, not just a suggestion). The older men are the first to slink away; they *were* wiser, apparently: conscience-pricked, they had the sense to realize the implications.

Then comes the best part of the story: atonement. There is no one left to condemn the woman, and neither does Jesus. Instead, he offers her a chance to repent – while adding one crucial command (one often forgotten in the modern telling of this story): "Go now and leave your life of sin." We can almost certainly assume she did just that. It would no doubt have been a struggle at times. But what joy! A new follower of Jesus. Atoned. Forgiven. No longer afraid. Ready to say each day, "Here am I!"

See, the Lamb so long expected comes with pardon down from heaven.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, one and all, to be forgiven.
So when next he comes in glory and the world is wrapped in fear,
he will shield us with his mercy and with worlds of love draw near.

Thurs., Dec. 14 Isaiah 7:1-9; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; Luke 22:1-13; Psalm 18:1-20, Psalm 61

Christ's second coming is the main topic of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. Today we're introduced to the mysterious, terrifying "man of lawlessness," the leader of the forces of evil in the last times. Though lawlessness is already at work in our world, God is actually restraining it, says Paul. But there will come a time when God will allow the man of lawlessness to be revealed. God is going to let unregenerate humankind have its way (for a while). In the world we now live in, all of this is beginning to seem ever more plausible (in case you were inclined to dismiss it as symbolic, apocalyptic hyperbole).

Durer Last Judgment

But why on earth do we have to concentrate on this during Advent? Aren't there much more comforting passages we could be considering a few weeks before Christmas? Yes, of course, and a couple of them occur in today's other readings. Our great comfort (no matter what happens in our world, no matter what we Christ-confessors may yet have to endure) is this: the LORD is our strength. Our Rock: indestructible, immovable, ageless; the metaphor pertains to the strongest most permanent thing on earth in biblical times. And to that Psalm 18 adds one safe-in-battle adjective after another to describe God: our fortress, deliverer, shield, stronghold. (It should be clear by now we *are* in a battle of cosmic proportions; but we know the outcome!) Even when life is as bad as it can get, God will be our support. Picture Death personified entangling you with ropes, the grave's cords coiled around you; or you're about to be swept away in a flood. Watch God reach down, take hold of you and wrest you dripping from that treacherous water.

Now consider that in today's gospel reading Jesus is around his last Passover table and about to establish the Lord's Supper (the Eucharist). This seems a strange combination with the other readings. But perhaps not: would we be safe from death (figurative and literal) or Satan's wiles in these last days (and from the man of lawlessness) had Christ not died for us and given us a share in his victory over sin? The sacrament Christ instituted confirms us in God's unending love and faithfulness. So it *does* all come down to this: the LORD is our strength. Thanks be to God!

O day for which creation and all its tribes were made!
O joy for all its former grief a thousand-fold repaid!
The armies of the ransomed have fought with death and sin:
fling open wide the mighty gates to let the victors in!

Fri., Dec. 15 Isaiah 7:10-25; 2 Thess. 2:13-3:5; Luke 22:14-30; Psalms 102 and 16

Jesus, still at the Passover meal with his disciples, has some thrilling words for them, and for us: "You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." Not just the 12 disciples (or rather, 11), but all of us who share in Jesus's trials, who take up our crosses and follow him, will reign with him (see also 1 Tim. 2:12).

Accepting the Gift is the easy part. But true discipleship takes perseverance and single-mindedness. Even Peter would falter, and in the worst moments. Jesus, in fact, tells him, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." On our way, we can approach the throne of grace with confidence (Heb. 4:16) because the very Christ who prayed for Peter is *our* mediator too.

The Apostle Paul also knew so very well about the need for perseverance. He urges the Thessalonians – and us – to remain true to our LORD, to "stand firm." We can do that when we "hold to the teachings" Paul passed on to the Thessalonians and to us" i.e., the Good News of Jesus Christ. And when Christ comes to reign he will confer on us his Kingdom! Thanks be to God!

Born thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a king;
Born to reign in us forever, now they gracious kingdom bring.
By thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all sufficient merit raise us to thy glorious throne.

Sat., Dec. 16 Isaiah 8:1-15; 2 Thess. 3:6-18; Luke 22:31-38; Psalms 43 and 118

Yet again the divide between God and those who snub God and go their own way. It is a self-imposed divide. God warns Isaiah not to go the way his fellow Israelites had gone. Don't get caught up in their conspiracies, don't fear what they fear. You are to regard *me*, not pagan gods, as holy, says the LORD Almighty; you are to fear, even dread, *me*.

These days, we're no longer used to talking about "dreading" God. Hellfire-and-damnation sermons are out. God's love and mercy are in. Even many *Christians* don't take very seriously the vast gulf between God and us (apart from Christ); or the Judgement that God insists again and again will one day come. We make a huge mistake, though, if we don't take God at his word – both the word we like to hear and the word that unsettles us, and yes, that should make us afraid, full of dread (apart from Christ).

However, if we worship God as LORD and Saviour, then there is wonderful, comforting news for us: "He will be a sanctuary" for us, a strong and safe hiding place. But here's an irony: the very Rock that is Isaiah's (and our) strength caused the Israelites to stumble. Psalm 118 says it similarly: "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone." It is still happening to those who prefer their way to God's. The NIV Study Bible sums it up succinctly: "Either the LORD is the cornerstone of our lives or he is a rock over which we fall" (note on Isa. 8:14). Once the Messiah had come, he too would be referred to as that kind of stumbling block (and in doing so, Paul and Peter quote the Old Testament; cf. Rom. 9:33 and 1 Peter 2:6-8) . What about you? Is he a stumbling block for you, or the Rock on whom you rely?

He is the rock of our belief, the heart of mercy's gentle self.
His kingly crown is holiness; his scepter is his loveliness;
He brings our sorrows to an end. Now gladly praise our king and friend.

Advent III

Sun., Dec. 17 Isaiah 13:1-13; Heb. 12:18-29; John 3:22-30; Psalms 24, 25

As much as we might like to gloss over the fact that God hates and punishes sin, we're not going to find any help in Scripture for that kind of myopia. Isaiah warns his fellow Israelites that they will not escape God's wrath if they keep defying God. (Over the years they would worship false gods, participate in temple prostitution and even sacrifice of their own children to those gods; they would oppress the poor and vulnerable, act dishonestly in business, and generally become a stench in the nostrils of the one holy Creator God.) He kept calling them back – his own chosen people – and they kept being unfaithful to him. Finally he takes drastic measures: he lets pagan nations run over them, murder and enslave them. God is merciful, but he wouldn't God if he were not also just; and we, and the universe, would be unable to rely on him.

As we see with the Israelites, God our Father disciplines those he loves – as any good human parent does. (Human parents must take their cue from him, the perfect example of fatherhood). His prodding of us is an offer and re-offer of grace. We must "see to it," as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" – bitter roots like pride, jealousy, animosity, dishonesty, immorality (there are many more). "... See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks."

Why? Well, God deserves our worship, of course. But frankly, it's also in our own best

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interests. "Our God is a consuming fire," says Hebrews 12: 29, quoting Exodus 24:17 and Deuteronomy 9:3. We're toast, so to speak, if we defy God and try to write him out of our lives. God created us in his very image. He created us "very good"(the only part of his marvelous creation that he labels "*very* good"). He created us to worship him, to live for his glory. When we don't we're like fish on land, incapable of being what we were created to be; and guaranteed death. When we don't we grieve God, who loves us so entirely that he sent his Son in our flesh-and-blood to die for us, to cut out all those "bitter roots."

During Advent we once again enact the waiting for his coming. "Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles!" David pleads in Psalm 25. Thanks be to God, he *has* sent our Redemption. And none who come to him will ever be turned away.

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation, hope of all the earth thou art,
Dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

Mon., Dec. 18 Isaiah 8:16-9:1; 2 Peter 1:1-11; Luke 22:39-53; Psalms 122 and 67

"Pray that you will not fall into temptation," Jesus tells his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, before he withdraws "a stone's throw" from them to pray. Though Jesus's horrific sacrifice is looming, and surely filling his mind (and will be the subject of his prayer) he thinks first of his disciples. He knows our weaknesses, how easily we're distracted, how easily we tire, and tire of doing good. And indeed, when Jesus returns he finds his closest followers asleep, oblivious to the sweating anguish he had been suffering, and to the angel who came to minister to him.

Peter, having been one of those yawning, self-absorbed disciples – and one who would within hours betray his Lord – knew first-hand how easy it is to succumb to the devil's tempting.

So in today's reading he urges that we be "eager to make our calling and election sure." I thought God's call to salvation was irrevocable, you may say. Well, yes (though not all Christians believe it), but you can't just say, Ok, I'm saved, now I can do my thing and I'll worry about God some day – "continue to sin so that grace may abound," as Paul puts it in Romans (6:1, KJV). So Peter says, "Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love." It's a progression, this road to sanctification; and the progression culminates in love.

But it also began in Love, in God's heart, with the Saviour incarnated in body and blood like ours. Thanks be to God for his most precious gift!

Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down!
Fix in us they humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.

Tues., Dec. 19 Isaiah 9:1-7; 2 Peter 1:12-21; Luke 22:54-69; Psalms 45 and 47

Around the world at Advent and Christmas the performing of Handel's oratorio *Messiah* is a long tradition. I have heard this work since childhood and for some years have been singing in a symphony chorus that regularly performs it, an experience that is hardly describable in terms of its profound spiritual-musical impact. Clearly, millions of performers and listeners have felt the same since the work debuted in 1742: it continues to be the most often heard piece of classical music in history. Why is that?

There are two reasons: first, *Messiah's* libretto is Scripture itself, and God's Word does not return to him empty; it accomplishes what he desires and achieves his purposes (Isa. 55:11). The texts were compiled by Charles Jennens with the stated purpose of presenting the entire story of salvation. Second, Handel, himself a man of faith (though many now deny it), had the consummate musical gift that enabled him to set these biblical texts in a way that sears them into a listener's memory and heart. God's Spirit seems to move in a way peculiar and profound when the Spirit-breathed Word is set to such superb music.

Today's Isaiah passage particularly "sings" for anyone who loves both *Messiah* and the Messiah. Isaiah begins at the end, by talking about results. He assures the distressed and wayward Israelites (and the yearning remnant of the faithful among them), "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned." Handel manages to combine this stumbling around in spiritual darkness with the Messiah's dawning light in one double-duty melody that halts and weaves, then leaps symbolically upward each time the bass soloist sings of that "great light."

Now Isaiah backs up and announces how it will happen: a royal son will be born to you, one on whose shoulders the government will rest! (who has all authority in heaven and earth). Then Isaiah lists titles for this royal son, not just names but description of who and what he is: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Handel embodied these words in what has become one of *Messiah's* favourite choruses. He exuberantly alludes to this royal wonder and might with a common musical trick that has an uncommon effect: he has each voice part (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) begin "For unto us a child is born" on its own, each one singing the same joyous but fragile melody (utterly appropriate for the happy announcement of the tiny baby's birth). Then there's a remarkable change: in strong, block chords with a skipping rhythm all the voices call out together: "Wonderful, Counselor [there's a comma in the King James Version], Almighty God, Everlasting Father." On "Prince of Peace" the rhythm smooths out and we feel like we're "home."

What an extraordinary gift God has given us in music. What a satisfying means to thank for his greatest Gift of all!

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, your welcome shall proclaim,
And heaven's eternal arches ring with your beloved name.

Correction: The Dec. 7 readings (Nov 20 issue) should be Isaiah 2:5-22 ... Psalms 1 and 126

Listening to the heartbeat of God...*continued from p.11*

world, with its powerful forces of science, economy and technology, pretends to know everything, to have infinite knowledge and to have the potential for infinite knowledge. Our modernized world is driven by that pride. The modern world seeks to bring all things under the power of human ingenuity and expertise. We must not embrace that spirit and apply it to the Gospel.

Instead, Paul says, be aware of and live within the limits of what you know, even celebrate those limits and be content. Be aware of your ignorance and let God take care of what you don't know. And what you know the least about is the timing of Christ's return. That is for me to know, says God, for my own inscrutable purposes, and not for you to manipulate. Don't try to be like God. All you need to know is near you, it's right at hand, it's intimately available to you, it's already in your mouth and in your heart.

What then is that word that is very near to us? It's the word of truth – the call to love God and our neighbour with our whole heart. It's captured in Paul's appeal to no longer regard people "according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16): according to curses or to nation-states based on race. Jesus also declared this word when he announced his mission on the earth (Lk. 4:18-19): The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he said, because he has anointed me to preach Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

He declared it again in that very dramatic moment when he entered Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a horse and chariot, which was the expectation. The horse and chariot was the most advanced military technology of the day and used by the thousands against Israel. But God prohibited Israel from acquiring it. Jesus explicitly rejects the militarism of both God's people and the Roman empire.

Through Jesus, the living God is saying to us, I am the heartbeat of the world. If you want to know where I am active, listen for it. I do not come in the loud storm of weapons and bombs. I do not come in the ravaging wind of the modern-day generation of wealth at all costs. I do not come in frenetic anxiety about the future, or in response to the arrogant, self-interested and destructive attempts to manipulate my return. Instead, I am as near to you as your own beating heart.

I come in your greatest joys and in your deepest sorrows. I am deeply within your soul. I come when you find ways to love others, even your enemies. I come when you seek peace. You will hear my heartbeat in the grandmothers of Burundi, who have disobeyed their warring men at great risk to themselves, and linked together for peace. You will hear my heartbeat in the heroic, unsung efforts at reconciliation by Palestinians and Jews. Israel's special place in my redemption is to show uncommon justice and mercy to all, as an example for the world. Listen for my beating heart, which bleeds for this world.

Jesus died alone, abandoned, poor and in the renunciation of self-interest and human power. He died in order to reclaim this cosmos, this earth, it says in John 3:16, which he loves so much. Are we prepared to follow him? Are we prepared to end up alone, become poor, reject self-interest and separate ourselves from the pretensions of infinite human knowledge and power? Are we prepared to get off of our horses and chariots and onto our donkeys and follow him?

That's not an easy question to answer. I do not find it easy to answer. My friend is searching for an answer. But if we are ready to follow him, then we will participate in a Gospel that will shake the foundations of the world.

Mark Vander Vennen is the author, with Bob Goudzwaard and David Van Heemst, of Hope in Troubled Times: A New Vision for Confronting Global Crises, *with a Foreword by Desmond M. Tutu, to be published by Baker Publishing Group in May, 2007. He lives in Cobourg, Ontario.*

Change

The times – they is a-changing

Frank DeVries

It is Sunday morning, and close to church-going time. I look out one of the two living room windows, the one looking out on the alleyway twixt our home and the candy store of Jan Verhagen. Into the alley, walking past the Verhagens and towards the small meeting hall farther down the alley walk the members of the Zwarte Petten Club, the Black Cap Club, as everybody calls them. They all are dressed in black coats, caps, hats, and shoes; the women clutch black purses; and the kids wear black stockings. A murder of black crows – somber, sad and, to me, scary. Even today they still make me wonder why they dressed totally in black. The only thing I can think of today is that they belonged to a denomination burdened down by human sinfulness rather than lifted up by human joy through redemption in Christ.

The Zwarte Petten faithfully attend their little church every Sunday, and stay there for hours not going home until well after my family and I have come back home from the morning service in the Gereformeerde Kerk.

In the evening my Dad and I often go to the evening service there. I am 7 years old. My Mom usually stays home with my 2-year-old sister. Tonight is no different. Together with all other members of the congregation we walk to church. It is pretty cold. In the pew it is comfortable. The small red light goes off, and the last few members of the congregation who have been waiting in the back file into the pews. They had to wait for the red light to go off because at that time, about 5 minutes before the service begins, all those who have not paid for a pew seat may sit down anywhere that's unoccupied– including the unoccupied rented seats. The dominee appears out of a side door accompanied by one of the elders. They shake hands and part ways: the dominee to ascend the pulpit, the elder to join the other elders in the special pews to the left.

The service begins. I sit beside my Dad up in the balcony. Wout Batelaan plays the organ. I see the top of his head sticking out above the small curtain that separates the mysteries of keyboards and organ-stops from the rest of the congregation. Wout plays beautifully. After a long prayer and the singing of all 495 verses of a Psalm, the lights dim and the dominee begins his sermon.

At the beginning of the message Dad takes out a tablet of Wrigley's chewing gum and breaks or bites it (I don't recall which) into two pieces. I get the smallest half. Contentedly I rest my head against my Dad's rough-textured coat and slowly begin to chew. My right hand is underneath the seat of the pew where over the generations have been deposited massive chunks of dried-out, pieces of chewed-out gum, placed there by the departed devout. With the gum's flavor gone South, they were finished with it, and not knowing what to do with it stuck it there – out of sight, though not out of feel.

Halfway through the sermon, the service stops for the middle Psalm. The voorzinger walks up to the lectern and sings the first line of the Psalm. The congregation obediently sings it after him. We sing throughout the entire Psalm that way. The voorzinger sings badly off key, and it bugs me, and I wished he'd stop. I know the melody well and could sing it better than he. Imagine me going up front there doing that!

The minister launches into the second half of his sermon. In the pew ahead of us sit Mr. and Mrs. Hemsbergen. Mister Hemsbergen has a large head with a grey ring of hair around a bald pate. There are brown spots on it. His right arm is on top of the pew and around his wife's shoulders. I like that.

I keep myself busy adding the Psalm numbers and verses and see if I can get the same total twice in a row. After the mental calisthenics, I climb on top of the pew so that I can swing from one of the 12 or so metal bars that stretch from one wall to the other one, holding them up so that they won't fall on the people, I suppose. I swing really hard, then let go and firmly grasp with my hands the second one, travelling through the entire church in this way, swinging above the heads of all the people.

Then I count the organ pipes. That's hard, because when I'm about halfway, they all run together and I have to start all over again. There are three statues of golden angels on top of the organ loft. Each angel blows a trumpet: one blows into the congregation, the other two play to the sides. The pulpit light illuminates the angels from below, giving them an un-earthy glow. Appropriately so, I guess.

The Amen sounds, a final song, then the doxology, and the service is over. Dad and I walk home. It is still cold outside. Inside of me is a warm glow. Church was good.

Fast forward 70 years. My wife Celia and I are members of Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Richmond, BC, a congregation we joined two years ago when we moved here. ICRC has three Sunday morning worship services that follow each other. The first one is in the Fujian language, the second one in Mandarin, and the third one in English. Because our knowledge of both Fujian and Mandarin is as good as our Outer-Mongolian, we attend the English service. It starts at 11:30 in the morning. All members of the congregation, except Celia, me and the caretaker, are Chinese from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the Philippines, or Indonesia.

The first service of the month is always a combined service which is usually in Mandarin with a translator provided. That service is always a tad daunting, for then there are two sermons – one we understand, and one we don't.

A problem that frequently occurs in the morning service is that the preacher tells a joke in Mandarin, and everybody laughs, but we don't understand the humor until the joke is translated. The congregation has already laughed heartily at the joke, but all we can do now is offer a lone, patronizing, wan smile.

On this Sunday, too, the Apostles Creed is usually

Continued on p. 16...

My window seat

Mendelt Hoekstra

The near extinction of free

For a world that speaks about free throws, free drops, free agents and free kicks, very little in sports is free nowadays. This past week the Boston Red Sox, who play professional Major League Baseball paid 51.1 million dollars to negotiate with Japanese pitcher Diasuke Matsuzaka, who currently plays in the Japan Pacific League. It must be understood that the 51.1 million dollars is not being paid for the Red Sox to *sign* the player but only to *talk* to the player. The Red Sox have 30 days in which to sign the player and it has been reported that they have outbid several other teams for the right to converse with this player and his agent.

In terms of professional baseball league pitchers, Matsuzaka is one of the best ones and he has long been considered one of the brightest prospects in Japanese professional baseball. He was the most valuable player in the 2006 World Baseball Classic, and the 26-year-old has led the Pacific League in many categories over his 8-year career. But to pay more than 50 million dollars just to talk to someone seems illogical even when we are talking about professional sports.

Sports have changed since the time of free autographs and "meet an athlete" sessions that used to be gratis. Barry Bonds, a current Major League Baseball player, has participated in a meet-and-greet session with fans that cost the fan $7,500 per person and $10,000 per couple. Games that used to be on free air television are now usually on cable, and even some radio broadcasts have been moved to satellite (pay-per-listen) channels. Where the pre-game press buffet was always free in the past, there are now some teams charging the media outlets to eat, proving that there is no such thing as a free lunch.

Purchasing tickets for most events now comes with a "convenience charge" or "handling fee," making one wonder who is being handled and for whose convenience. A hotel bill can automatically add a 15 per cent "service charge" and strangely still leave space for a tip.

Often the word "free" appears to be what it seems, until you spot the asterisk on the top right hand corner of the "e". Such as the "free* fleece blanket…with your paid subscription to *MACLEAN'S*.

In a couple of weeks I am traveling by air from Toronto to Vancouver, a trip that I have taken dozens of times in the past few years. I soon will be asked by the attendant at the check-in counter if someone has packed anything in my bag without my knowledge. Well, how would I know? While those questions are free to be answered the correct way, there was a time when airline meals and headphones were free. When I leave Vancouver I will be charged a ten dollar airport improvement fee. In the spring, the carrier I was flying on was charging passengers for the use of a blanket.

I now pay 25 cents for air to pump up the tires on my bicycle and have paid for a bottle of water at the corner store. In other words, there has never been a worse time to be a cheapskate.

On the other hand there are still things that are still truly priceless. It costs nothing to smile at your colleague or give your old pal a hug. It is still free to think and think about being free. The truth is still free, and eternal life doesn't cost *us* anything.

A college basketball coach said to an interviewer that he likes to tell funny stories when he speaks to large groups. When the interviewer asked for a sample of the funny stories, the coach replied that he would have to charge $20,000. The interviewer laughed and waited for a story but the coach was serious about his speaking fee and after an awkward silence changed the subject.

Which certainly was his choice. It is after all a free country. Or used to be.

Mendelt D. Hoekstra is the founder and director of the Music Therapy program at Bethesda, an organization owned and operated by the Mennonite Brethren Conference of Ontario, that supports adults with developmental possibilities. He lives in Vineland, ON with Marisa and their three children.

Ecclesiastes

Don't neglect reason

If the ax is dull
and its edge unsharpened,
more strength is needed
but skill will bring success. Ecclesiastes 10:10

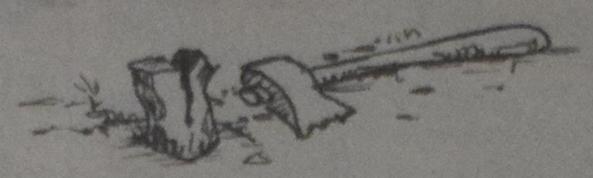
A. A. van Ruler

This won't happen to a skilled workman. In the days when lumberjacks used axes to cut down trees, they knew only too well that it was vital to keep their ax blade sharp. They regularly devoted time to sharpening their tools.

An amateur might think that all the time the lumberjack spends honing his axe or the mower his scythe is better spent chopping or mowing. Amateurs, laymen and klutzes pick up an ax and start swinging. They don't even notice that the axe has become dull. They pay no attention to their tools, and they have no eye for their condition. They have no feel for the job.

At any rate, they don't take the time to stop their work to sharpen the ax. Or maybe they're just too careless and too lazy. It's even possible that they don't know how. Chopping wood requires skill, but honing an axe to a sharp edge takes even more skill. However, amateurs have no idea – they just go on chopping away with a dull ax.

They look like they're working very hard, but they are shockingly stupid. After a while they are no longer cutting with a keen edge but smashing away at the tree with a hunk of steel. If you abuse an ax long enough it becomes so dull that it no longer cuts. At last even the dullest layman notices that something is wrong, but then it's often too late. By then the ax is ruined, but in the meantime the woodcutter has expended enormous amounts of energy needlessly.



What does the Preacher have in mind with these homely observations? Is he interested in studying the things of everyday life, the ordinary things that occupy human beings? No doubt there is a great fund of wisdom and benefit in the close and careful study of how things normally function in the world. We all should become closer observers, take a little distance from the daily round of life to let the nature of life sink in, come down to earth a little, wake ourselves from our intoxication with life's pursuits.

It is also possible that the Preacher amuses himself by observing the foolish things that happen in human life and that he is mocking human folly. There can be something condescending and pretentious in such a stance, especially if a person is unaware that often he is equally stupid in the way he does his work. Then the observations take on a satirical edge, and they lose any sense of love and solidarity.

Or are the Preacher's observations the result of pessimism, despondency or hypochondria? Does he touch on the dull ax and the waste of energy in order to once again focus our attention on the fundamental futility of much human effort to show that life is essentially futile?

All of these – close observation, mockery and complaint about the human situation – can be found in the Preacher's observations But the dominant tone, it seems to me, is humorous. The Preacher stresses that all this extra effort is unnecessary. If we pay attention, if we take the time to acquire the necessary skills, if we make it a habit to treat things with care, if we take the time to follow the proper steps – then the ax won't get so dull that we end up working ourselves to a frazzle. If we do things right, eventually the tree is felled and the wood is cut. To succeed in what we are doing, we need wisdom.

So according to the Preacher, we human beings have not completely lost all our wisdom. It is true that we cannot encompass and penetrate the whole of reality. There are innumerable things that go beyond our comprehension. The ways of God wind through dark alleys, and we should respect that.

Above all, we must not forget to observe God's commandments. Even more important than living by our own wisdom is living in obedience to God's authority.

But let's be careful not to get too extreme here either. God himself does not command out of a purely arbitrary sovereignty and power. He acts and speaks out of a divine wisdom. That wisdom may be beyond us, but on the other hand human deliberation also participates in that wisdom.

In many things that we do we can be wise like God. These who live pious, obedient lives that show godly fruit eventually discover this modicum of wisdom that has been given to us. And then we do not make life needlessly more complicated, more difficult and futile than it is.

The accent here, thus, falls on wisdom, on reason, on insight and deliberation. We must invest ourselves in this life, take an active interest in it. We must chop wood. But this demands all the capacities that we've been given. We must not go at it blindly. God has given us eyes to observe closely what we are doing. We can ascertain whether we are working as efficiently as possible, whether we are acting intelligently. This, too, is part of our calling. It is part of godliness.

There is another side to this godliness besides respecting God and making rational use of our gifts. There is also the matter of making good, rational use of the means given us. The ax needs to be honed to a sharp edge to enable us to do our work properly. Only then are we able to get out of it what is in it.

We must exploit the means given us. We must exploit the earth, the world and all of creation. We must get out of them what is in them. Our creator has put it all there for us to get it out. In doing so, we image God, for we are made in his image.

From the biblical point of view, technology is a great gift, as is science. We must go on exploring the atom and outer space. We have by no means discovered everything that is hidden in creation. Uncovering it all seems to be an endless task. But we must proceed with reason. The rational unfolding of life and the world is also part of the perspective of biblical faith. In this pursuit we are participating in the wisdom of God.

However, God is not only wisdom; he is also goodness and holiness, beauty and majesty, will and power. So we must not think that we can get there only with science and technology. We also need art and ethics, religion and godly living, reverence and piety – in a word: simply being-here in our walk with God.

The times ... *continued from p. 15*

recited in unison, everyone saying it in his or her own language. All these people in a variety of different languages confessing the same statement of belief is a strangely moving experience.

On the last Sunday of the month people take turns providing a lunch for the English congregation of about 80 people. Usually it is Chinese food. When our turn came we purchased buns from a Dutch baker here in Richmond and prepared them in two ways: one stack of buns with Gouda cheese, the other one with rookworst. They went the way of all good food.

Today was the 27th anniversary service. It was a combined service. The sanctuary was filled to overflowing with hundreds of people. Large red letters on the wall to the left of the stage and pulpit announced the occasion: 27th ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION. On the wall to the right of the stage was the same announcement in a vertical row of Mandarin characters. I suspect it was the same announcement, because I noted the number 27.

The service began with a violin solo of a 10-year-old boy playing "Now Is the Time to Worship," followed by the invocation and prayer. And then there was music, music and more music. The 30+ ICRC choir sang the stirring "Here in the House of the Lord" in a way that was in direct competition with the Mormon Tabernacle choir, followed by a corporate congregational Declaration of Faith. This in turn was followed by a children's choir and it again by the Sunday school children, after which the ICRC choir again sang several beautiful musical pieces. Between two of the selections I sneaked out, walking back through the main aisle because I had to pee. To my great consternation I then noticed that there were another hundred or so people seated on chairs in the annex, and I had to walk smack in front of them all to get to the men's washroom, and so they all knew what I likely had to do in there, and I didn't like that at all.

Then it was time for the Scriptural meditation by Pastor Peter Lim, who took the first 2 verses of Romans 12 for his powerful exhortation: "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God," pointing out that the nature of a sacrifice is that it is made in toto: it can not be made "halfway." He clearly showed us all once again that God wants all of us every day of the week.

A special offering had been arranged, and all members of the congregation in turn walked up to the front of the sanctuary to deposit a special thanksgiving donation into a red box. This was followed by a flute and violin duet, players who often accompanied the choir with descants. A special note must be made here of a jazz guitarist/singer who played and sang, "God is so good." There is in this church a prodigious amount of musical talent: various choirs, soloists and musicians of all sorts. In turn they frequently go out to other churches to aid in worship services there.

After a full two hours the special service ended with Pastor Lim giving the benediction, followed by the ICRC choir blessing us on the way out with the singing of the beautiful, "May the Love of God Enfold You."

It took a while to get out of the full parking lot, followed by the 20-minute drive home.

In the evening – Sunday evening, that is – a celebratory banquet was held in a large well-known Chinese restaurant with banquet facilities. 260 people attended. Opened and closed with prayer, of course, it was a typical Chinese meal with about 10 courses given over a period of about two and a half hours. The desert was a piece of the anniversary cake and red bean soup with grains of cooked rice and sweetened with brown sugar.

What a difference time has made, both in proximity of worship place and worship service. Here we are, two transplanted Dutchies worshipping together with of hundreds of people of a different race. What a nice paraphrase on Galatians 3:28 one could make here:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, Chinese nor Dutch, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Yes, it is a lot different from 70 years ago. Still it is the same. And so I feel curiously at home.

Frank DeVries,
Richmond, BC

Reunion

Grateful reflections by those for whom the cow bell tolled

Bert Witvoet

Class reunions are a bit like getting married or slaughtering pigs (to use a Frisian expression): you never know how they turn out. Class reunions can be valuable, and they can be a total waste of time. I've heard stories on both sides of the divide. But the class reunion I attended a few weeks ago was outstanding in value and richness.

I'm talking about a reunion that represented a lot of firsts in Christian education in Canada: *the two first graduating classes* (1960 and 1961) *of the first Reformed Christian high school in Canada:* Hamilton District Christian High School. No, I was not a fellow graduate; but, together with my brother Lowell Witvoet (the first principal of HDCH) and fellow teacher Jessie Helmus-Persenaire, we represented the early teaching staff at that institute. The three of us formed sixty percent of the staff that led this fledgling school in 1961 – the second principal, Rev. Wiebe Van Dyk (deceased) and science teacher Mr. Tony Ten Kate were the two missing staff members. And so the three of us with two of our spouses joined about 15 students and some of their spouses for three consecutive get-togethers the same weekend that HDCH celebrated its 50th anniversary. The larger school celebrations were perhaps more significant, certainly for the larger Hamilton community, but the smaller double-class reunion excelled in intimacy and focus.

Food and fellowship

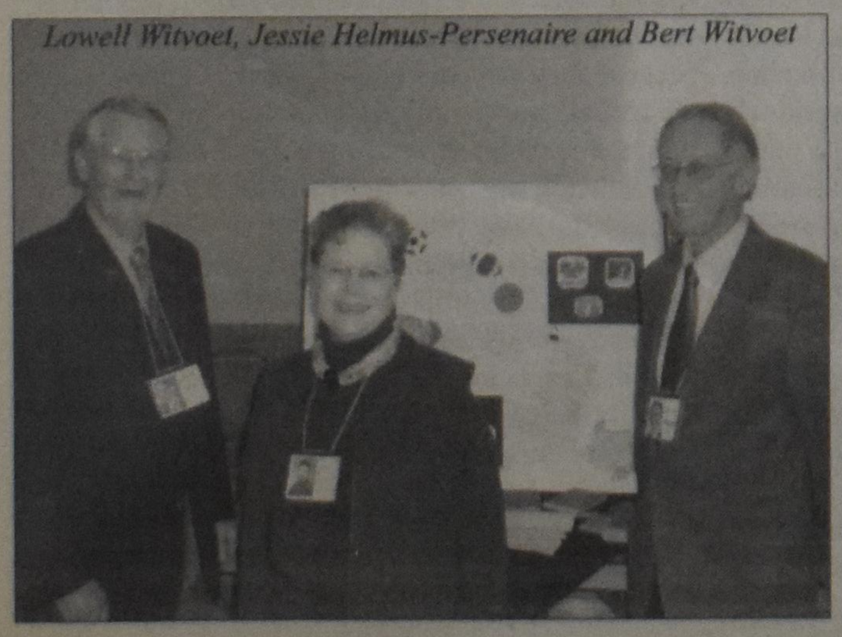
The three class reunion events took place in each of the three church basements that hosted the new high school in the early years. What a great time we had as we gathered Friday afternoon for a meal and introductory events at Mount Hamilton Christian Reformed Church, where the full-fledged high school met in 1959 and 1960. The next day, Saturday, we enjoyed a banquet and program at Immanuel Christian Reformed Church, the place where the incomplete high school used rooms before 1959. On Sunday, we met at the down-town First Hamilton CRC for lunch and farewells, the place where we settled for a year before moving into an actual high school building at 28 Athens Street (That building has since been sold and the current HDCH occupies the excellent and expansive facilities at 92 Glancaster Road in Ancaster (See www.hdch.org).

As a former teacher, who experienced first-hand the primitive conditions with respect to facilities and resources, I was amazed to see how well all these guinea-pig students had turned out. What struck me most was their spiritual maturity and Christian character that manifested itself in so many ways that weekend. They showed genuine concern for each other and a deep appreciation for what God had done through the humble efforts of parents, teachers and other staff and volunteers. How good it would be if their parents could today see the results of their dedication and sacrifice (some of them can, but many have passed on).

One could tell that the alumni here felt very comfortable with each other. Years and decades of absence had not broken the bonds forged in those early years of post-immigration life in Canada. During a tour of the "school in the basement" there was an instant rush to occupy a certain chair in the old classroom — "This is where I sat. Don't take my seat!" We competed in telling stories, reminiscing and analyzing what had taken place in that basement classroom.

Lack of equipment

I don't want to romanticize the primitive conditions we worked under — no sports equipment except a few balls, a gravel parking lot for soccer and handball games, a cow bell instead of an electrically timed buzzer, a blackboard and chalk, no library, a kitchen that functioned as science lab, curtains that acted as walls, stacking tables and chairs instead of desks, and a metal pass that said "pass" to allow students to leave the classroom with permission. Oh yes, when it appeared that we could not have a music appreciation course because no money could be found to purchase a record player, someone donated a phonograph. And presto! the music program became a reality. As I said, I don't want to romanticize these conditions. But neither do I lament the make-do approach to this early venture.



Lowell Witvoet, Jessie Helmus-Persenaire and Bert Witvoet

Much holy laughter

Oddly enough, the sparse and stark surroundings never stopped the students and teachers from seeing the lighter side of life. A lot of laughter echoed off the concrete walls. The reunion brought back some of that laughter as we recalled some funny situations.

One student, whose name shall be withheld to protect his blissfully ignorant offspring, told us that he had been caught smoking on school property for the third time. The principal, Rev. Wiebe Van Dyke, a loving but strict disciplinarian, decided to expel him for three days. But the boy did not dare go home with that news. He was afraid that his father, who could apparently outperform Rev. Van Dyk in strictness, would take him out of the school and place him in a public high school — something the boy did not relish. So he went to the parsonage of Rev. John Ehlers, which was next door to our church basement facilities. Rev. Ehlers realized the risk of sending this boy home and discussed the crisis with Rev. Van Dyk. Van Dyk decided to let him stay at school during the three days, but he sentenced him to solitary confinement in the consistory room upstairs. The other students were not to know about this arrangement because Van Dyk did not want it known that he had bent the rules. Not surprisingly, the students found out, and they sent out messages to the exile by hitting the ceiling with a broomstick. Rescued from raw justice at home, the young man eventually returned to his class and in the end graduated. Today he is a professor of history.

Here's another funny incident we recalled. Mr. Ten Kate was discussing with a salesman the need to place a sanitary napkin machine in the girls' washroom. Rev. Van Dyk, a fairly recent immigrant to Canada, whose knowledge of the language and customs in Canada was somewhat wanting, was also in the room. He overheard Mr. Ten Kate discussing the new contraption and piped up: "I sink we should hef one for the Boys' washroom, too." I don't remember how Mr. Ten Kate handled that one, but the boys never did get a sanitary napkin dispenser in their washroom.

All of this was recollected with the greatest appreciation and respect for Rev. Van Dyk, who sacrificed several years of his preferred kind of pastoral ministry for the benefit of Christian education. We all toasted this remarkable man who has gone to be with his Lord. Mary Kooy-Appel especially owes so much to this kind principal-pastor. She recalls how Rev. Van Dyk visited her parents after her graduation and told them that their daughter would go to Calvin College in a few weeks. When her parents protested with a "We can't afford that," Rev. Van Dyk pointed a finger at them and proclaimed: "Vere der is a vill, dere is a vay." End of discussion.

Mary went to Calvin College. Today she is a professor of education.

Rich rewards

In spite of the obvious lack of resources, it remains surprising to see how many of these early students flourished. Among them are teachers, principals, pastors, professors, forensic scientist, nurses, business owners, missionaries and managers. It puts the lie to the idea that a successful education depends on excellent facilities and equipment and a curriculum that offers lots of choice. At the same time we cannot equate academic excellence with rustic and primitive conditions or lack of the most basic school materials. Nevertheless, what happened during those early years more than rewarded the early pioneers of Christian secondary education — parents, teachers and students alike. God was faithful as he saw the extent to which his children were willing to sacrifice.

But the members of these classes were not spared painful challenges in their lives. Some former students experienced failed marriages. Some have struggled and even abandoned the faith. I don't like to dwell on these things, but honesty demands that we not gloss over the difficulties that some of these former students encountered. Especially during the final luncheon we prayed for those who had been hurt and who had fallen away from the faith. Sympathetic tears flowed and we sensed the presence of God's Spirit in our midst. What made the reunion so valuable for me was that there was recognition of these hurts and failures in life. All of us can attest to the fact that God's faithfulness is way out of proportion to our troth and obedience to him.

Well done!

What stood out in my mind, too, was the excellent work done by the three volunteers

...Continued on p. 18

Reunion

who had planned and prepared this intimate reunion. Mary Kooy-Appel, Corrie Bootsma-Span and Ineke Bezuyn-Colenbrander had worked hard to make this event the success that it was. They had driven hundreds of kilometers for some six or seven meetings to make sure that our reunion would not be subject to the whims of getting married and slaughtering pigs. Their dedication and attention to detail showed me something of the Kingdom of Heaven. They made sure that what we were left with was not just a sweet memory of bygone days, a sentimental journey into the receding past, but they gave us a vision of what life is like when God is in our midst. Let me urge any of you who are planning reunions of any sort to take the time and effort to prepare well. It pays off in spades, or should I say "hearts" since we are using a card game metaphor here, not entirely in keeping with the ethical standards of our forebears.

Organizer Ineke Bezuyn herself speaks of the value of looking back for the purpose of seeing how God has blessed those who stepped out in faith. She thinks particularly of her parents and the parents of her classmates who lived and breathed Psalm 124: "If the Lord had not been on our side … the flood [of deprivation and poverty] would have engulfed us…. Our help is in the name of the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." After looking back 50 years, she finds unbelievable what people asked of themselves and of others for the sake of Christian education. For example, teachers were asked to live in other towns so they could drive a school bus back and forth every day.

As I reflect on the reunion, I realize that the story reaches far beyond the events of the weekend. Through the stories and the lived experiences, we saw a demonstration of unwavering faith and trust in those early post-immigrant days that led to the establishment of the first Reformed Christian high school in Canada. I am glad that we were part of that foundational work. My wish for succeeding generations is that there may always be "a vill" to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness.

Church and school connection

The Hamilton area always does things a little differently from other areas in Canada where Reformed Christian immigrants settled, I believe. From the start, Hamilton had a more established community that dates back to pre-World War II years. First Hamilton CRC, for example, was organized in 1929. When later immigrants came to the Hamilton and Niagara area after the Second World War, they were met by a number of U.S. CRC pastors: Rev. Teunis Van Kooten, Rev. P.Y De Jong, Rev. Alvin Venema, Rev. Adam Persenaire and Rev. John Ehlers. All these factors — older immigrants and an early dependence on U.S. pastors — contributed to rather close ties between school and church.

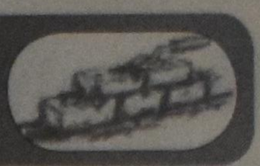
And so it was to be expected that when I signed my contract in 1960 with the Hamilton District Christian High School, the three other signatures on my contract were those of CRC pastors: Rev. John Ehlers, the chair of the board, Rev. Alvin Venema, the secretary, and Rev. Wiebe Van Dyk, the principal. When I took a position at Toronto District Christian High School four years later, there were no pastor names on my contract. When Redeemer College was started in Hamilton, its first president was, again, a pastor — Rev. Henry de Bolster. The King's College in Edmonton did not take that route when it appointed an academic, Dr. Henk Van Andel, as president.

I am not criticizing this connection between church and school, and I'm quite aware that the schools have outgrown that connection over the years; yet it does seem to me that this tendency has put a stamp on the Hamilton CRC and school community. Hamilton was less influenced by the Kuyperian theme of sphere sovereignty than were other communities. Interesting that the mass rally in Hamilton Place celebrating the 50th anniversary of HDCH, resembled more a church service, complete with praise team and alumni pastors, than a school celebration. Again, I am not saying there's anything wrong with this emphasis. It just occurred to me that this is something Hamilton would do.

B.W.

BuildingTrust

Vicky Van Andel



Equality and mutual respect

Each day, on the central square, in the heart of the old colonial little city of Granada in Nicaragua, one can find numerous stands displaying handmade articles for sale. Beaded necklaces, colourful clay pots, crocodile skin handbags and intricately woven tapestries adorn the various display tables. Behind these cheerfully decorated tables sit or stand the artists, calling out to everyone passing by to stop, look, and buy their handiworks. Most vendors are women, their children by their side.

One woman in particular caught my attention. She showed me a finely woven table runner with designs on it representing themes from local Nicaraguan folklore and culture. "These lines represent streets," she pointed out, "and those are symbols of Mayan culture. Here is a coffee plant with its beans." She continued to enthusiastically explain several other delicate details in the weaving.

Drawn in by the sincerity of this woman, I asked her how much the tapestry would cost. After a brief negotiation we agreed on forty dollars. I offered her the money and she carefully wrapped up the tapestry and gave it to me.

Back at the hotel I draped the weaving gently over a chair. I felt as if I possessed a precious gift. I had learned more about the history of the weaving after I had purchased it. The woman showed me several other cloths and explained their similarities and differences. "Some tapestries are woven tightly with fine thread, and others are more coarse and loose," she said. "Some take long to make and others can be done quickly. For example, it takes eight days to make that particular weaving," pointing at one particular tapestry, "and a whole month for this one, because of its intricate detail." It turned out my tapestry had taken a whole month to create. And it had been made by her sixteen year old daughter Lesvia.

I am visiting Granada to attend a conference on the promotion of international Christian higher education. My husband is presenting a workshop on the work of Christian Studies International, the organization he works for. He is one of many presenters. There are 160 registrants, representing 34 countries. I came along for the experience. I wanted to enjoy the scenery, the climate and take a rest from my activities at home. I did not set out to be intellectually stimulated.

However, in spite of my attitude, I am very intellectually stimulated. I am completely drawn in by the spirit of this multinational conference. The workshops are overwhelmingly inspiring. Each workshop leader offers research and reflections on what it means to be a Christian in her or his particular culture.

While Christianity appears to be declining in western society, it is spreading rapidly elsewhere in the world. Christianity is viewed as synonymous with and embodied in western capitalism. People in South and Central America, Asia, China and Africa do not want to adopt such a model of Christianity. It does not fit with their heritage. They see the downward moral spiral within western culture. They are expressing very clearly that they are on a mission to discover what it means to be a Christian within their own heritage and tradition. As one presenter emphatically states: "I need to know what it means to be a Japanese Christian. That is, to be a Christian, and at the same time remain Japanese."

A few days later I witnessed a tranquil scene which took me back to the words of the Japanese speaker. A little boy was feeding pigeons on a city square. As he sprinkled the seed, the pigeons eagerly gathered around him. They got so close to him that he could catch one. He held it in his arms. Stroking it gently, he proudly walked over to his mother. But it didn't take long before the pigeon started to squeak and squirm and the boy needed to let it go. Pigeons are not meant to be held. They are meant to fly. And it flew away.

I am also hearing a fervent call for equality and mutual respect between all people from all over the globe, a call to mutually listen to, and learn from each other. I am hearing deep convictions and assertive expressions by people from poor countries. They want to draw on their own inner strengths to become the people they are meant to be. They appeal to people from wealthier nations to listen, and share in their struggles to overcome the problems their countries face. "We have a lot to offer people from more affluent nations. We don't want to emulate the individualism dominating their culture. We have deeply rooted ceremonial tribal cultures and traditions, and a connectedness within our communities others can learn from."

Equality and mutual respect. The words sound familiar. Women talk about it all the time. This conference is validating to me, for that reason. Equality and mutual respect will make this world a better place. It means listening to each other, hearing each other out, and responding to each other. Equality and mutual respect are outcomes of healthy relationships between people and they lead to peace and harmony.

While this has to be our goal, it is far from achieved. As long as there are villages without clean water and adequate health care, as long as people are dying from AIDS acquired unknowingly, as long as children are sold for sex, and girls in India are killed because they are an economic burden, and women are abused, and people are homeless, and the environment is violated, equality is but a dream.

I treasure my weaving. I treasure it because it is beautiful, and because it took a young girl in Nicaragua a whole month to make, and because she made it for her living. A month of working on something would make one become part of it. And so I see Lesvia herself in it. Is there, however, any equality here? No. It takes me a lot less time to earn forty dollars.

Vicky Van Andel is the editor of this column. Anyone who would like to contribute to this column is invited to contact her via e-mail at: vickyv@telus.net

Business Directory

The simple truth about church growth ...continued from p. 11

Summary

We began with the imaginary conversation between Greetcha and Mary as they play cat and mouse over the superiority of Old First versus the new congregation with the extravagant name.

Mary and Greetcha prefer to imagine that simple and single causes underlie the success of the new congregation and the demise of the former.

Greetcha feels guilty and ashamed about her fate as she is going down with the ship.

Mary, in contrast, assumes that their ministry efforts are especially blessed because of the congregational growth.

It is my hope that every reader of these (so far) three articles will know exactly how to comfort Greetcha and how to reduce Mary's unbridled vanity.

It is my hope that you know that Greetcha and Mary – no matter how understandable their feelings may be – are mistaken. Church life and church growth defies reductionist analysis and simplistic prescription. If transitions really were that simple and that easily accomplished, none of us would be in small congregations.

A modest suggestion

A friend wondered why I am writing these articles. I answered that I am writing because I have to. It isn't a good answer. Not good enough.

After considerable internal conflict about church growth and non-growth, I have been dragged to the point where I recognize and admit that about 90% of the growth and decline that we experience is caused by complex forces at work in our communities.

These forces (the 90%) are vastly beyond our control – communities changing, generations passing, farm economies booming and busting – none of us have control over these matters.

There is one element in our environment that we can control: we can control our perceptions of our place and value in the kingdom of God. We can control our attitudes.

We can choose to be optimistic and energetic and hopeful and faithful with that 10 per cent that is in our control. Let us dare to believe that God has big plans for us.

And we can choose to be optimistic and energetic and hopeful and faithful towards the neighboring churches – both CRC and others. Let us believe that God has big plans for them, as well.

Twenty years ago is when I learned this lesson. Speaking at the Women's Missionary Union in Escondido, CA, I stumbled across an observation that I now share.

Peter, on Pentecost in Jerusalem preached, and 3000 were converted. Paul, far away from the center of Judaism, preached a fabulous sermon on Mars Hill. But the philosophers scorned Paul. Hardly anyone was converted.

Was Peter that much a better preacher than Paul? Was Peter so profound that 3000 were converted? Was Paul so inept that the philosopher laughed and walked away? Is that really the way we want to believe that God manages his church? Or was it something else?

Reverend Howerzyl sat in the audience that day, twenty years ago. After my talk he said, "That's good. You go with that."

And I did. I hope you follow Rev. Howerzyl's advice.

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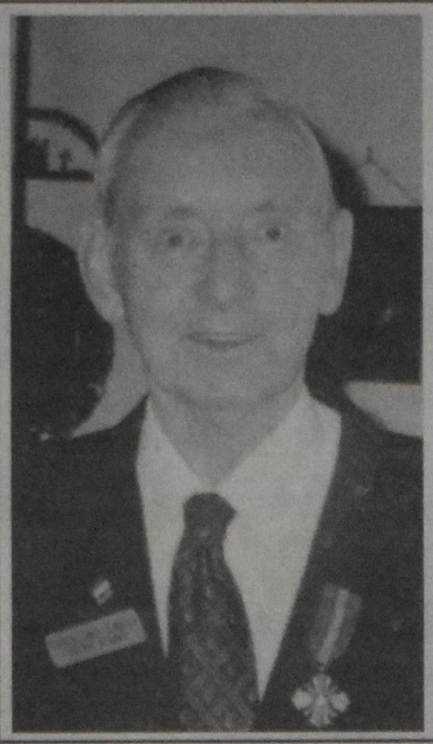
Classifieds

Thank You

Johan & Maatje Van Elburg
thank all those who remembered us on our 50th Wedding Anniversary.
It was a great Thanksgiving Weekend!

Praise God, From Whom All Blessings Flow

Birthday



Give Thanks to the Lord, for he is Good
The family of

Abram Niezen

wish to extend their love
and congratulations on
the occasion of his **90th Birthday**
on December 24th, 2006

Arie & Rena
Margaret & Paul, Robbie & Lynn
Russ & Nellie
Larry & Leslie, Cathy & Allan, Bob & Brenda
Bert & Diane
Brian & Nancy Jo, Dave & Melony
Ed & Kathryn, Chris & Hilda
Also 24 great-grandchildren

Open House will be held
at Wellingstone Homes on
Saturday Dec. 23, 2006, 2 p.m. - 4 p.m.
at the gathering room Phase 1

Home address: 1415 Upper Wellingstone
Unit 102 Hamilton ON L9A 5E8

Rev. Anthonie Vanden Ende

of 3 Elgin Place
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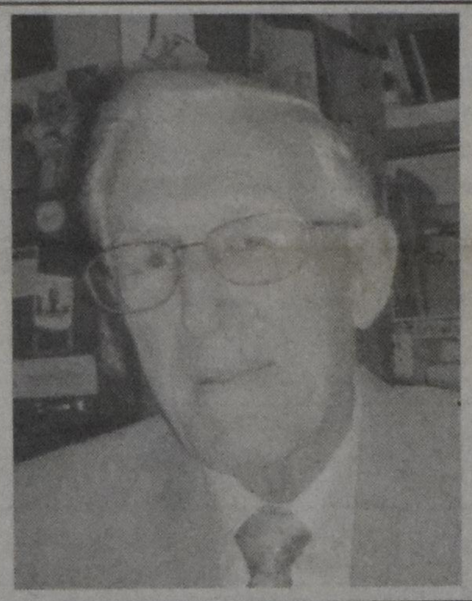
hopes to celebrate his

80th Birthday on

December 17.

We give thanks
to the God of mercies
for all his goodness.



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Events

Dutch Language
Christmas Carol Service
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in **Woodstock**. 170 Clarke St. N.
Babysitting Provided
Refreshments served following
the service. Everyone invited!

LIBERATION CHOIR IN CONCERT - 3rd ANNUAL CHRISTMAS SINGALONG
Friday, **December 22** @ 8 p.m.
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Willem Van Suijdam
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Anniversaries

Springdale 1956 — Stratford 2006
December 14, 2006

He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord. Proverbs 18:22

The children and grandchildren of

Dick and Shirley Miedema (nee **VanderKool**)

feel very blessed to celebrate the **50th Wedding Anniversary** of their parents and Pake and Beppe.

Dick and Shirley have faithfully passed on God's love and commitment to one another and to their children.
We are privileged to share this special day with them.
All friends and extended family are welcome to attend an **Open House** on Saturday, December 16
from 2:30-4:30 p.m. at Greenwood Court Nursing Home,
90 Greenwood Court, Stratford, Ontario.
Best Wishes Only.

Their children and grandchildren:
Betty & Bruce Witteveen, *Waxsaw, North Carolina*
Alana, Lydia & Ian
Sally & Brad Dilkes, *Sarnia, Ontario*
Colette, Camille & Rebecca
Margaret & Don Wulff, *Fergus, Ontario*
Graham, Michael, David, Timothy, Jonathan & Matthew
Carolin & Gord Cnossen, *Vancouver Island, British Columbia*
Justin
Kelly & Jack Bolding, *New Hamburg, Ontario*
Kirsten & Tia

Correspondence: Dick & Shirley Miedema,
303 Huron ST Stratford ON N5A 5T3

Hippolytushoef, NH The Netherlands — December 17 — Niagara Falls Ontario, Canada

With great joy and thankfulness to our Lord and Saviour, we join our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents in celebrating and announcing their **60th Wedding Anniversary**

Clarence (Klaas) and Jessie (Tjitske) Terpstra (nee **Ellens**)

Wedding Text: Psalm 48:14
For this God is our God forever and ever:
He will be our guide even unto death.
Want deze God is onze God eeuwig en altoos.
Hij zal ons geleiden tot den dood to.

Helen & Ted Postma, *Burlington*
Jason & Teresa Postma, *Peterborough*
Jaden, Tristan, Ariel, Robyn
Kelly & Scott Contini – Jessie and Ryan, *Guelph*
Matt & Carrie Postma – Brandon, *Waterdown*
Mette & Jack Vandenbout, *East Palmyra, NY, USA*
Adrian & fiancee Michelle
Ashley & Jay Newhart, *Silverspring, NJ, USA*
Jared
Pete & Katie Terpstra (Hennie†), *Wellandport*
Melissa & Andrew Porter – Benjamin, Kesiah, *King Kirkland*
Sherri & Richard Crawford – Joshua, Elijah, *Courtice*
Ryan & Amy, *Kitchener*
Kevin, *Langley, BC*
John & Alison Terpstra, *Niagara Falls*
Janine & Bryan Krasouski
Kristen
Lindsay
Mark
Andy & Yvonne Terpstra, *St. Catharines*
Robert
David
Travis

Correspondence addresss: Clarence & Jessie Terpstra
307 - 6305 Dunn St, Niagara Falls ON L2G

Our thanks to all who show their appreciation for the *Christian Courier* with comments, cards and year-end donations.

Your encouragement is greatly appreciated.

Harry, Rose & Ineke

Obituaries

Peacefully the Lord took home his child

Evert Borkent

on November 8, 2006 after a two year struggle with a debilitating brain tumor. Evert Borkent was born in Vriesenveen, The Netherlands on January 22, 1924 and leaves behind his beloved wife Jenny Borkent (Slomp), daughter Amy Borkent, son Harry Borkent (Rose) and their children Kristina (Kyle) Gordon, and Glen Turi. He is survived by four sisters in Holland Diny (Bram) Rijken, Riek (Gerhardes) Kassies, Eef (Henk) Lambers and Aly Vos and sister-in-law Tiny Borkent.

Funeral services were held on November 13, 2006 in Brooks, Alberta with Rev. Chris Fluit officiating.

1 Peter 1:3-9

Correspondence can be directed to Jenny Borkent,
229 - 500 3rd Street East, Brooks AB T1R 1P6.

Geesteren, Gelderland — December 26,1917 — Psalm 121 — Grimsby, Ontario — November 9, 2006

It pleased the Lord to take home his loving child our mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother on the Lord's day November 9th 2006 in her 89th year.

Antje Dina Kingma- nee **Peterkamp**

was promoted to glory, her earthly journey was done.
Loving wife of Marten Kingma - February 22nd, 2006

Lovingly remembered and sadly missed by her children
Jitske.& Geert Horinga, *Port Colborne, Ont*
Bertha VanderHeide, *Ingersol, Ont*
Shirley & Peter Stol, *Strathroy, Ont*
Marten & Nellie Kingma, *London, Ont*
Gerry Kingma, *Strathroy, Ont*
Bert & Diana Kingma, *Stoney Creek, Ont*
Andrew & Joanne Kingma, *Poplar Hil*

30 grandchildren and 1 with Jesus
38 great-grandchildren and 3 great-great-grandchildren
predeceased by her granddaughter Deanne Kingma
Her parents Engbert Jan and Berentje Peterkamp
her sisters Aaltjen & Maarten, Dina & Hendrik
her brothers Berend & Dien & Elly, Jan
survived by her sister-in-law Riek Peterkamp
and many, many nieces and nephews

Although we are saddened by her passing we have the assurance that she is at home with the Lord whom she loved very much

Funeral service was held at the East Christian Reformed Church
Strathroy, Ont. on Monday Nov. 13, 2006.
Pastor Walter DeRuiter officiated.

Correspondence address: Bertha VanderHeide
151 Hutchison Ave, Ingersol ON N5C 3Y6

Ruinerwold, The Netherlands — January 1, 1922 — Drayton, Ontario — October 28, 2006

Koop Roelof Drost

Beloved husband of Ann (Bakker) Drost of Drayton
went to be with his Lord on October 28, 2006.

Loving father of Luke & Sharon Drost, *Palmerston*
Amy & Bill Gerrits, *Clinton*
Dianne Culp, *Kitchener*
Ralph & Irent Drost, *Listowel*
John & Linda Drost, *Listowel*
17 grandchildren & 11 great-grandchildren

Psalm 90

Correspondence: Ann Drost
Conestoga Crest Apt 2 - 81 Wood St, Drayton ON N0G 1P0

Ministy Job Opportunity

BETHEL CRC is looking for a
full time Youth Director (YD)

to oversee it's youth and young adult program. The ideal candidate must have strong administrative, interpersonal, and leadership skills. We are looking to develop a relational youth ministry that is overseen by the Youth Ministry Committee. This position reports to church council.
Check out our website for a full job description at www.bethelcrc.com.
Interested applicants are asked to mail their resume to

Bethel CRC
345 Elizabeth St E, Listowel ON N4W 2P7
or email **office@bethelcrc.com**

Job Opportunities

THE KING'S UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

Christian University Education

The King's University College is a Christian liberal arts university college offering three and four-year Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees, a Bachelor of Commerce, a Bachelor of Music and a two-year after degree Bachelor of Education (Elementary) accredited by the province of Alberta. We are recruiting for the following **Assistant Professor (tenure track)** positions:

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Education (Language Arts)
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Political Science and/or Economics

Requirements include wholeheartedly endorsing the Mission Statement and the Statement of Faith. Candidates are expected to be engaged in an ongoing effort to articulate and develop Christian perspectives on their discipline, addressing the role that faith has in shaping their research and teaching practice. A Ph.D. is required for tenure track appointment. Successful candidates must demonstrate graduate level course work in areas of teaching.

Qualified candidates should forward a letter of application, curriculum vitae, transcripts and three letters of reference to:

Dr. Harry Spaling, Vice President (Academic)
The King's University College
9125 – 50 Street, Edmonton AB T6B 2H3
Phone: (780) 465-3500, ext. 8354 Fax: (780) 465-3534
E-mail: harry.spaling@kingsu.ca
More information is available at www.kingsu.net

Application deadline: January 15, 2007or until a suitable candidate is found.

In accordance with Canadian immigration regulations, this advertisement is addressed first to Canadian citizens and permanent residents. The University College encourages all qualified female and male candidates, including visible minorities, to apply.

REDEEMER University College

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The Department of Mathematics and Physics invites applications for a tenure-track position, to begin July 2007. The department prefers candidates who can teach at the undergraduate level in both mathematics and physics, but will consider candidates with primary expertise in mathematics.

As a liberal arts and sciences university college rooted in the Reformed tradition of Christianity, we seek candidates who are committed to teaching and pursuing scholarship from this perspective. Applicants should possess, or be near completion of, a Ph.D. Interested applicants should submit a *curriculum vitae*, three letters of reference, evidence of teaching quality, and a one-page or two-page statement describing their own faith commitment and how it shapes their academic work.

The deadline for applications is January 31, 2007.

Direct general inquiries and applications to:

Dr. Jacob P. Ellens, Vice-President (Academic)
Redeemer University College
777 Garner Road East
Ancaster, ON L9K 1J4 Canada
jellens@redeemer.ca

Redeemer University College offers equal employment opportunities to qualified applicants. In accordance with Canadian Immigration requirements. Canadian citizens and permanent residents will be considered first for this position.

Principal

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We are seeking a leader with a commitment to Jesus Christ for an interdenominational 7 – 12 school with an enrolment of approximately 300 students, beginning August 1, 2007. Applicants should have an enthusiasm for the Reformed vision of Christian education and have administrative and team-building abilities.

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Mr. Corny VanDasselaar, Chairman
Principal Search Committee
***RR-8-41-3*, Lethbridge AB T1J 4P4**

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OACS

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The Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (OACS), Ontario's oldest and largest independent school organization representing 82 non-denominational Christian schools, is seeking to appoint a suitable candidate for its senior management team.

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A detailed job description and qualification schedule is available upon request. Salary and benefits will be commensurate with training and experience as outlined in the *OACS/OCSAA Administrators' Salary Guidelines*.

Suitably qualified Christian applicants are invited to apply before December 31, 2006. The successful applicant would commence duties in July, 2007.

A formal Letter of Application and supporting references should be sent to:

Dr. A. Guldemond, Executive Director
Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools
617 Garner Road, E.,
Ancaster ON L9G 3K9

Informal inquiries can be made to the Executive Director at adriang@oacs.org.

www.oacs.org

SASKATOON CHRISTIAN SCHOOL invites applications for the position of

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- see school website (http://www.saskatoonchristianschool.ca) for a more complete description

Duties to commence August, 2007.

Interested persons should direct inquiries to:

Klaas de Rooy, SSCE Board Chairman
Email: klaasderooy@shaw.ca
Fax: (306) 249 – 3082 Office phone: (306) 249 - 3035 Cell phone: (306) 221 - 7900
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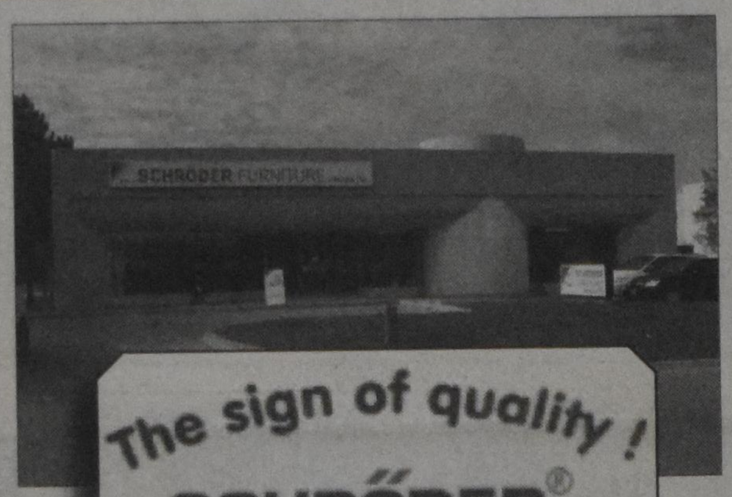

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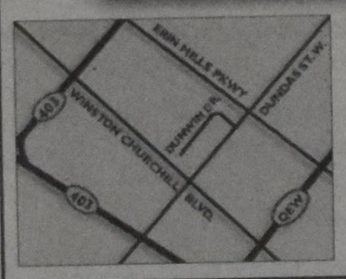

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Events/Advertising

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec 10 Dutch Service will be held in the **Ancaster** CRC at 3:00 p.m. Rev. Henry DeBolster will be preaching.

Dec 10 Dutch Language Christmas Carol Service, 7:30 p.m. at Emmanuel Reformed Church in **Woodstock**. See ad this issue.

Dec 22 LIBERATION CHOIR - 3rd ANNUAL CHRISTMAS SINGALONG 8 PM Central Presbyterian Church, 165 Charlton Ave West, Hamilton ON Director and Organist: Willem Van Suijdam Free-will offering for Worldwide Christian Schools. Contact: WCS at 905 333 4430

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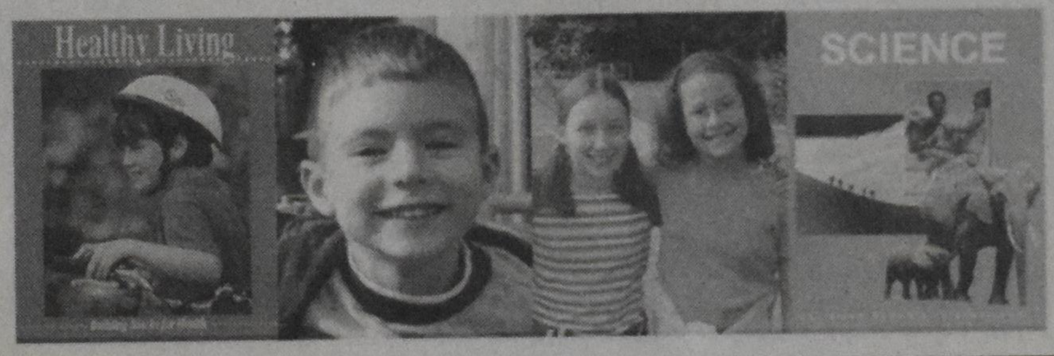

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Just another reminder that our Christmas issue will be Dec.18. Please let us know if you want to be included with special Christmas greetings or advertisements by Dec.6.

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News

Sudan closing off Darfur to outside world

International observers, journalists, and humanitarian organizations are being forced out by the government.

Katharine Houreld

EL-FASHIR, SUDAN – The African Union patrol was only seven miles from Sirba, the site of one of the latest Darfur massacres, when they were forced to turn back. Nearly 400 Arab militiamen in Sudanese government uniforms, with new Land Cruisers and weapons, blocked the dusty track.

The recent incident was only the latest in a crackdown on access for international observers, journalists, and humanitarian organizations – a pattern that is becoming wearily familiar to those working in Darfur.

"The timing is no coincidence," says Leslie Lefkow of Human Rights Watch. "[Sudan is] stemming the flow of information from Darfur while it continues to commit massive crimes and run a military campaign."

As outgoing UN chief Kofi Annan began a major push to stem the escalating crisis during high-level meetings in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Nov. 16, the Sudanese government told top UN humanitarian official Jan Egeland that all his proposed destinations on a three-day trip to Darfur were too insecure to visit.

The previous week, the Norwegian Refugee Council announced it was being forced out of Darfur after its permit to operate had been indefinitely suspended for the fifth time, making working conditions "impossible." Other foreign aid workers say they have been denied permission to reenter the country after leaving to attend a family emergency or to seek medical treatment.

Killings mount

Thirty villagers were reported killed in Sirba, but no outside investigators were able to enter the town to confirm the reports.

Sudanese rebels accused government troops and militias of killing more than 50 people in another attack. Three weeks ago, 63 people were reported killed in Jebel Moon, and their bodies buried in the desert.

In that case, investigators were able to access the massacre site, and found that more than 20 of the victims were children. Some of them had been shot through the head. Survivors described Arab men in uniforms, with Thuraya satellite phones, new vehicles, and animals, similar to the group seen only a few miles away barring the road to Sirba.

The government-backed militias have been blamed for hundreds of atrocities since local, non-Arab tribes first took up arms to protest government neglect and the arming of Arab tribes three years ago. Since then, an estimated 200,000 people have died and 2.5 million have fled their homes.

After the government signed a peace deal with one of the three rebel factions last May, the militias, known as the janjaweed, were supposed to be disarmed. Instead, the government appears to be using them as a proxy force to avoid accusations of cease-fire violations. But accurate reporting of militia movements, and alleged massacres, is becoming increasingly difficult.

Crackdown on journalists, aid workers

Journalists able to secure a visa face a bewildering array of permits and paperwork; the Sudanese government must be informed in advance of any travel in Darfur. Officials insist on listening to interviews; they intimidate interviewees, and have attempted to confiscate notebooks.

"I can take any of [your permits] I want ... you're going to hell," one official hissed at this reporter. "Do you think this is a free country?" Last week, all permits for journalists to travel to the region were being denied.

The African Union (AU) monitoring force of nearly 7,000 soldiers is also frequently stymied in its investigative attempts. Officials say fuel is stolen, government permission for them to leave their bases is refused, and their soldiers have been killed when convoys were attacked.

During the one-day talks in Ethiopia with UN, EU, and Arab League officials Nov. 16, Mr. Annan pushed for a "hybrid" force of AU and UN peacekeepers to be allowed into Darfur. But early indications were that Sudan would reject this.

Even humanitarian organizations, charged with delivering food, water, and medicine to destitute Sudanese, are under attack. When Doctors Without Borders spoke out about rape cases last year, its two most senior staff were arrested. Since then, aid agencies say the situation has worsened.

"It's disgusting. They are holding their own people hostage to shut us up," complained one aid worker bitterly. "If we speak out, we get thrown out. Then who will help these people?"

Tens of millions of dollars and a Herculean effort have managed to stabilize key humanitarian indicators like the infant mortality and malnutrition rates, and aid agencies are reluctant to risk their hard-won gains by criticizing the government for atrocities.

All aid workers interviewed for this article agreed to speak only on condition of anonymity.

But it's not only the government that is piling on the pressure. Thirteen humanitarian workers have been killed since last May's peace deal, which pitted signatory and non-signatory rebel groups against each other. As the fighting intensifies along the Chadian border and in the north, all sides in this conflict want vehicles and the shiny white 4x4s used by aid groups are a tempting target.

Carjackings of both aid vehicles and commercial trucks are rampant. In a single day last month, nine vehicles were snatched. Convoys have also been attacked and employees beaten up or sexually harassed, say aid workers here.

The breakdown in security means vast swaths of northern Darfur are no-go areas for groups providing food, medicine, and clean water for tens of thousands of displaced villagers. "It's become very dangerous to work here," says another aid worker, whose organization has suffered repeated attacks. "Before, we could negotiate with the rebels for safe access, but now we don't know who controls what territory any more."

Pinned on the wall behind her was a series of maps showing humanitarian access for Darfur month by month. The inaccessible areas, colored orange, are spreading like spilled ink.

Katharine Houreld is a Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

News Digest

The Lutherans have at long last officially apologized to those accursed Anabaptists. High time too. Luther said some nasty things about that heretical, rebellious bunch of rabble. He wasn't nearly as kind and loving as all Christians are nowadays – except perhaps for those dangerous American fundies, who go to church wearing brass knuckles.

Making public apologies for things done at various times in the past is quickly becoming mandatory for those who wish to go forward unburdened with guilt. Shouldn't Dutch Calvinists apologize to the Anabaptists as well? And to the Catholic church for disparaging that noble institution as corrupt and wayward? Must we apologize for Servetus? Or since there are no Servetans to apologize to, can we get away with that one?

Of course, as a Christian male I should apologize to all women because they weren't permitted to serve as office bearers for hundreds of years. Well, perhaps not to *all* women: what of those who aren't members of any church or who didn't want to be office bearers – surely I don't have to apologize to them.

As a member of that class of persons called fathers, perhaps I ought to apologize for the numerous generations of fathers who thought they had to be breadwinners and heads of families. Sorry for the unmitigated arrogance.

As one born in Holland, should I feel guilt for those seamen who profited from the slave trade? But perhaps I should consult a lawyer before admitting complicity there. Of course, since I am now a Canadian maybe that identity can be put behind me.

But as an immigrant to Canada, am I part of that barbaric wave of invaders that almost wiped out aboriginal culture? Or can we blame that on the French and British? After all, the Dutch tried their utmost to sweep the British from the sea. Still, maybe it's not ethnicity that counts here but race. All those with white faces ought to apologize. The rest can settle here with a free conscience.

This apologizing to free oneself from the violence of history could get to be a pretty complex business. An enterprising person might hang out his shingle as a Guilt Claim Adjudicator to help people sort out what part of the horrific past is their responsibility, how much it weighs and how much they owe in the way of apologies and reparations.

It's not fruit – it's the veggies. Those who eat two or more servings of veggies per day slow their mental decline by as much as 40 percent. Fruit doesn't seem to help the brain. But if you use your brain, you'll also remember the other end of your body. Keep eating fruit.

The biology of aging favors the development of a talent we call wisdom according to Gene Cohen's book, *The Mature Mind*. With advancing age, the brain becomes more balanced: people can increasingly rely on both sides of the brain to do various cognitive tasks. In a test involving verbal dexterity, people around 70 years old actually performed better than those 25 years old. Good news for aging writers and editors.

More good news. According to a more precise study of forests around the world, the trees are making a comeback – in richer countries at least. But also in India and China. As people move to the cities, they use less firewood. The article doesn't mention the other side of the coin: they obviously need to burn something to cook and keep warm. So the reforestation doesn't necessarily help reduce carbon dioxide and global warming as the article suggests. Bummer.